03

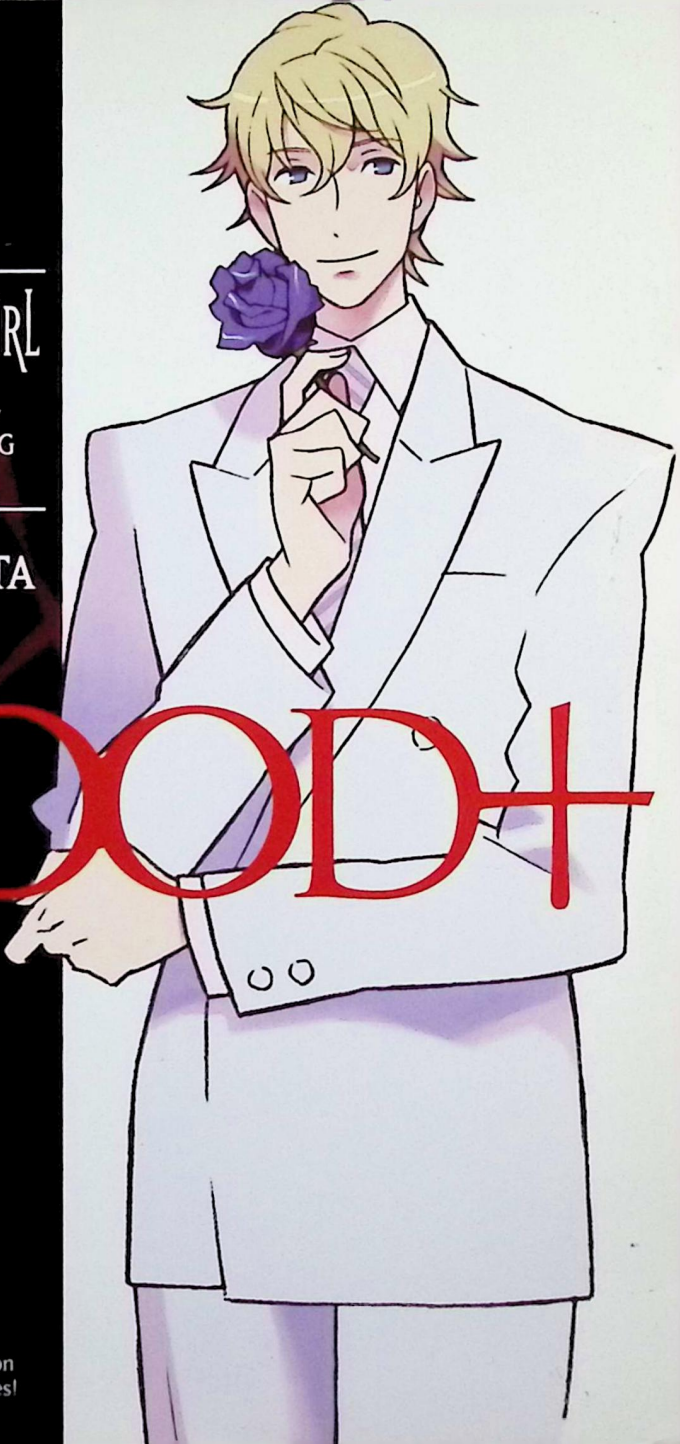
BOY MEETS GIRL

Original concept by
PRODUCTION I.G
ANIPLEX

A novel by
RYO IKEHATA

Illustrations by
CHIZU HASHII

BLOOD+



Based on the hit Cartoon Network animated series!

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PRODUCTION I.G
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RYO IKEHATA

BLOOD+

THE OFFICIAL NOVELIZATION OF THE INTERNATIONAL HIT ANIMATED SERIES CONTINUES!

The monsters are winning. Saya Otonashi thought she could battle against the Chiropterans, defeat the undead monsters, and avenge the life of her adoptive father. But the creatures, led by Diva, the twin sister Saya never knew she had, have struck a fatal blow: their attack on Saya's adopted brother Riku has left him near death, infected with the vampiric curse and destined to transform into a Chevalier, a half-human abomination with an unquenchable bloodlust.

In search of answers, Saya finds herself drawn to the journal of nineteenth-century scholar Joel Goldschmidt. As Saya reads Joel's diary, she learns more about her past of murder and horror, the perverse origins of the Red Shield organization, and the grotesque destiny she and Diva share. Determined to end her sister's reign of terror, Saya launches an attack against her and her minions, but is she too late? Diva has infiltrated Red Shield's headquarters, intent on slaying everyone within . . .

Exploring hidden secrets untold in the anime, the official adaptation of the worldwide phenomenon *Blood+* continues!

Featuring nineteen pages of illustrations by series character designer Chizu Hashii.

Translated by John Thomas.

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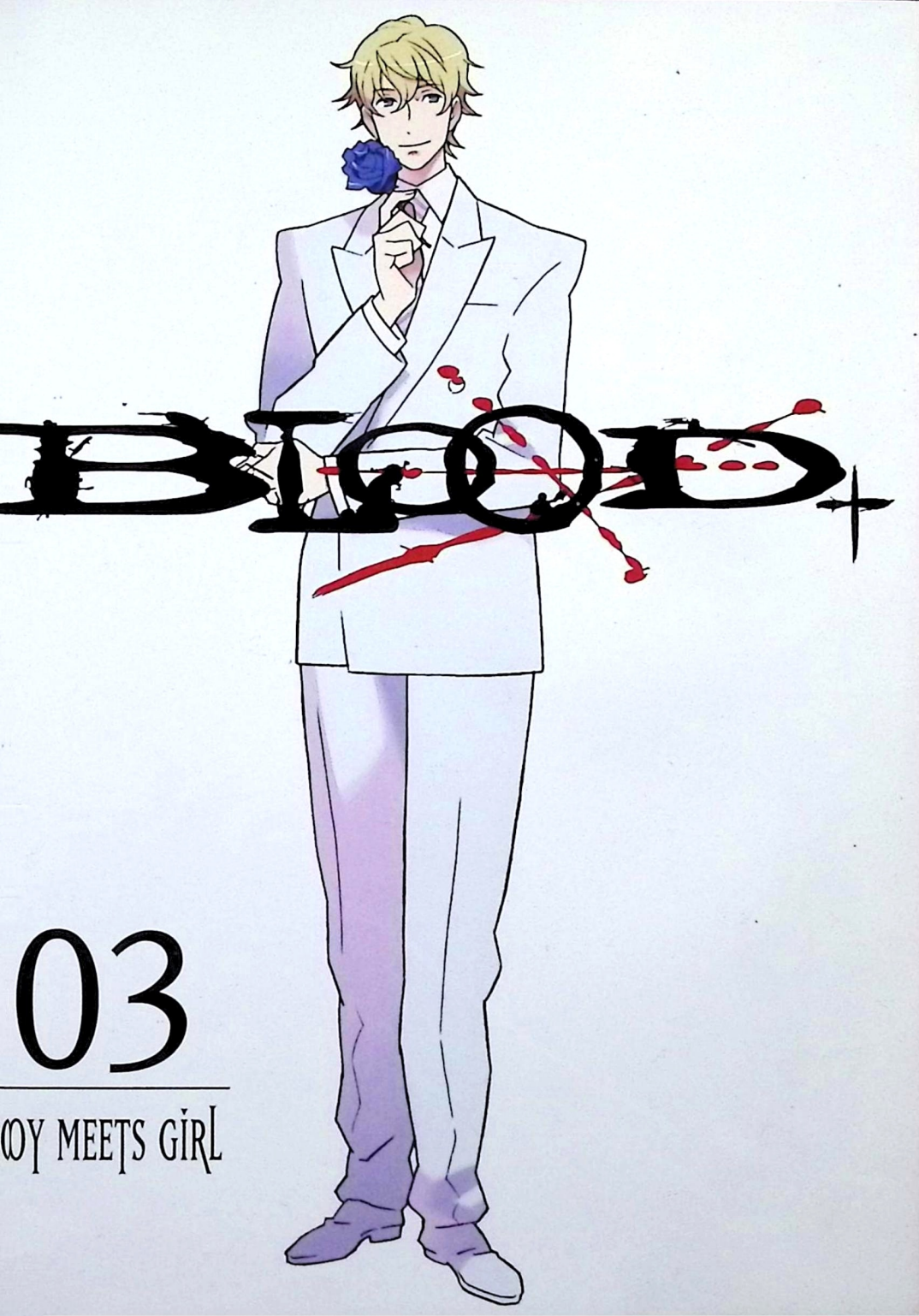
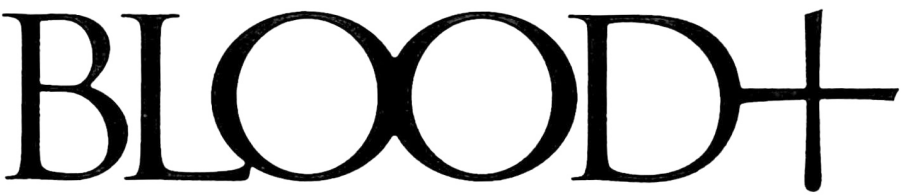

BLOOD+
03
BOY MEETS GIRL

The door she was forbidden to open. The queen of the Chiropterans is freed and Saya mourns those important to her. Is this her curse for opening the door? Or the fate of the blood that flows through her?
In order to sacrifice no more lives, Saya chooses to fight alone. She is joined only by Hagi . . .
it is my fault many were killed
and are still dying.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BLOOD+

BOY MEETS GIRL

VOLUME THREE

original concept by Production I.G • Aniplex

a novel by Ryo Ikehata

illustrations by Chizu Hashii

English translation by John Thomas

Milwaukie

SAYA OTONASHI—A girl who has lived over one-hundred years and who fights the bloodsucking beasts, the Chiropterans. She seeks to continue her battle with her long-time enemy, Diva.

RIKU MIYAGUSUKU—Kai's little brother and a good-natured boy. He was nearly killed by Diva, but becoming Saya's Chevalier saved his life.

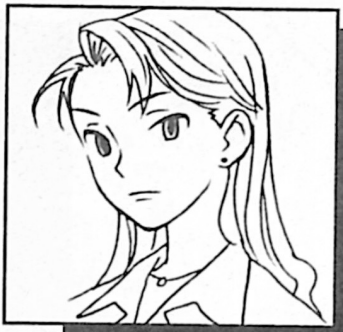
HAGI—A handsome cellist. He is a Chevalier who is always at Saya's side to fight the Chiropterans.

DAVID—A battlefield professional and member of Red Shield, the secret organization out to destroy the Chiropterans. He pursues Diva with an iron will.

KAI MIYAGUSUKU—Short tempered but pure hearted, this boy puts nothing above his family. He follows Saya despite her mysterious past and uncertain fate.

LOUIS—A Red Shield member and David's partner. His expertise in intelligence gathering supports the team, and he has a voracious appetite.

JULIA—A member of Red Shield's medical team. She and Collins both have a passion for Chiropteran biological research . . .



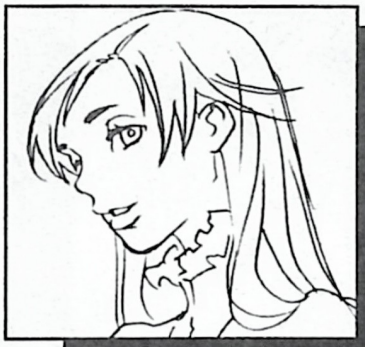
MAO JAHANA—Kai's classmate. She and Okamura went to search for Kai after he and Saya disappeared from Okinawa.

JOEL—Director of Red Shield and head of the incredibly wealthy Goldschmidt family. He is putting it all on the line to ensure the annihilation of Chiropterans.

AKIHIRO OKAMURA—A reporter for the Ryukyu Daily Newspaper. He is interested in the series of Chiropteran incidents in Okinawa, and, with Mao, follows Saya's footsteps.

COLLINS—Red Shield's number-two man and head of its medical research section. His greatest passion is his Chiropteran research.

VAN ARGENO—An executive at Cinq Flèche Pharmaceuticals who works under Solomon. He is partially responsible for the development of Delta 67, a drug that changes people into Chiropterans.



DIVA—Saya's twin sister and queen of the Chiropterans. She is pure as an angel and cruel as a devil.

KARL—One of Diva's Chevaliers. No one knows where Karl went after losing the battle with Saya in Vietnam.

ANSHEL—Head of the gigantic corporation Goldsmith Holdings. He is also the eldest of Diva's Chevaliers.

JAMES—One of Diva's Chevaliers. He is also the captain of a nuclear-powered aircraft carrier in the U.S. Navy. His military spirit is seen in his no-nonsense attitude.

SOLOMON—The CEO of Cinq Flèche Pharmaceuticals. He is one of Diva's Chevaliers, but has feelings for Saya.

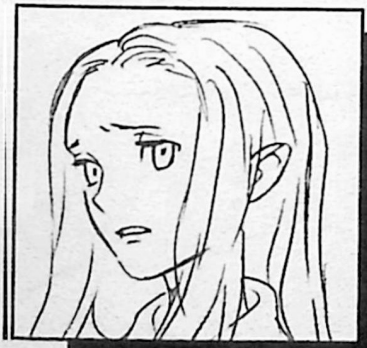
NATHAN—The youngest of Diva's Chevaliers. He is also the producer for an opera house. His character and way of speaking are a bit feminine.

MOSES—One of the Schiff, manmade Chiropterans created at a research laboratory in Kilbed. He has taken on the burden of being the Schiff's leader.

LULU—A member of the Schiff. She talks like a child and cares for nothing more than her Schiff comrades. This pint-size girl wields a giant battle-ax.

CARMEN—Like Moses, an artificially manufactured Chiropteran, or Schiff. His personality is a combination of theatrical and belligerent and he carries a long pike brandishing three blades.

GREY—David's mentor from his time in the army. Now Grey is retired from the military and takes care of war orphans.



AURÉLIEN—A beautiful Schiff girl. Among her comrades, she has the most heightened senses, and she can hear things happening from far away.

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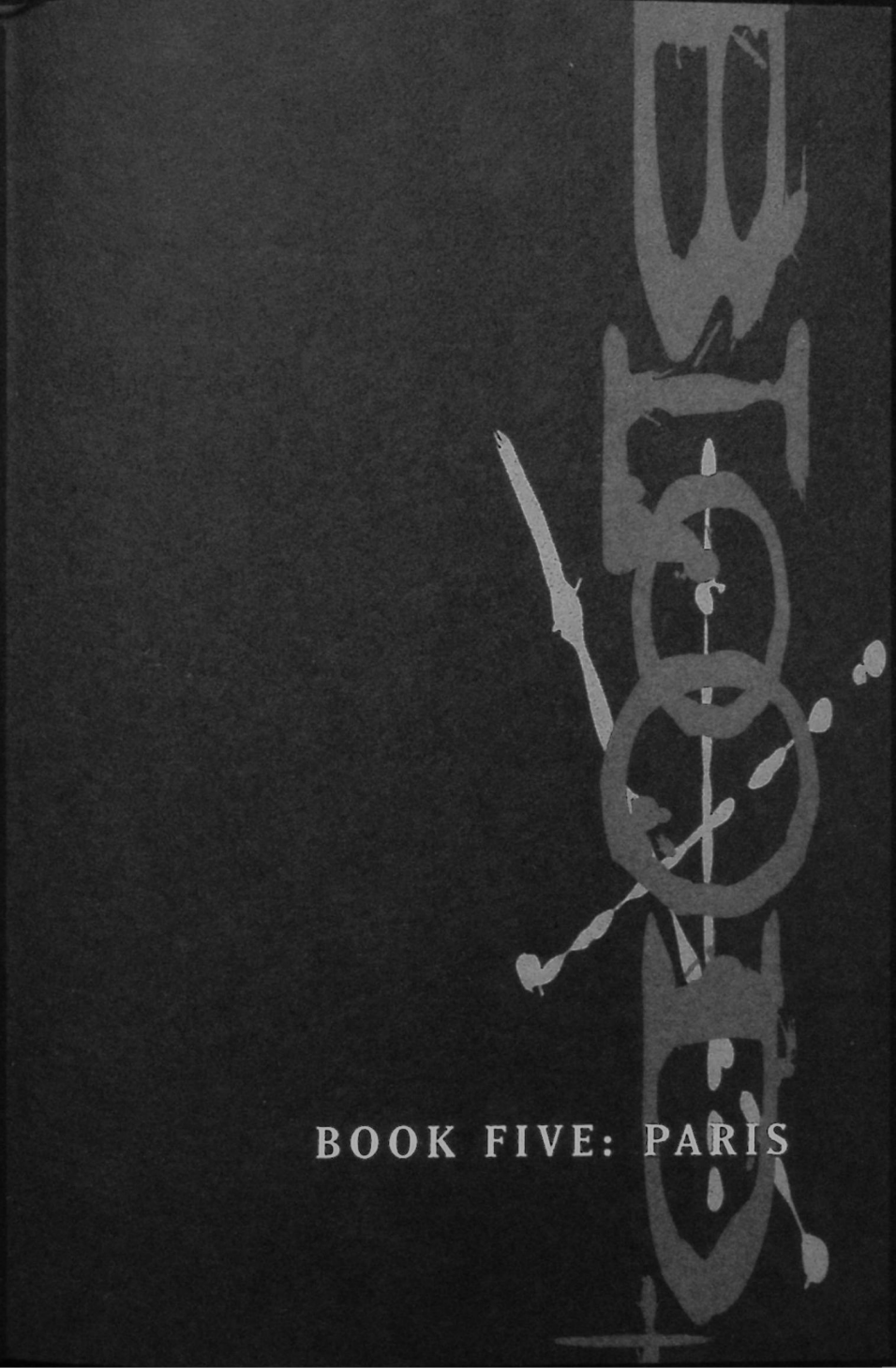


BOOK FIVE: PARIS

01

THE DAGGER SLICED through the humid air.

The morning sun had mostly dried the rain off the Paris streets, but dew lingered on the leaves of shrubs still cast in shadows.

Saya parried a slice to her throat with an upward swing of her trusted blade.

And yet, her naked sword was unable to pierce her opponent.

He retreated with magnificent skill, and Saya immediately pursued. She couldn't allow more space to get between them.

On the other hand, she shouldn't let him get too close, either. Taking on a short dagger with her long blade was no easy feat. Her rival was a skilled fighter—the purpose of the fight was to hone Saya's own skills.

As the long body of her opponent glided backward, Saya stuck with him pouring on her attacks. She wasn't able to deliver a bone-breaking or killing blow, just tease the threat of breaking his skin.

As the young man slid across the stone-paved ground, he deftly moved his dagger to block the strikes of the longer sword.

However, Saya was patient.

She carried the upper-hand in this fight. The only question was how she would finish it.

Even in the face of her continuous assault, her opponent's expression almost seemed bored.

She changed the tempo of her strikes, showing the increased breadth of her swordsmanship.

She swung to the left, and then switched direction in midair, bringing her blade down diagonally.

The shift seemed to throw the young man off slightly, and he adjusted the position of his dagger accordingly and took a leap backward. Her blade snipped the cuff of his black trousers.

It was the result she had expected.

Saya kept her composure and leapt up.

The young man's long hair flew out behind him as he escaped, but it fell forward at the same time that Saya landed on the other side of the flower garden.

She had blocked her rival's retreat, forcing him to stop. Not only that, he couldn't jump back. This garden was surrounded by the walls of four buildings, and he had landed in the corner between two of them. So, obviously, left or right weren't options, either.

Exhaling sharply, Saya thrust her sword with all her strength. And with a whip of her wrists, she stopped the blade just before it drew her opponent's blood.

What sounded like the clang of a bell rang out and faded away.

"I guess that's . . . round one."

Salt from the sweat above her lips hit her tongue as she smiled.

The tip of her sword danced close to the young man's exposed throat. Saya thrust the blade into the ground.

"Yes." The young man—Hagi—bowed his head and lowered the dagger he held in his right hand.

Saya let out a deep breath and looked across the bare blade of her katana.

"I am getting used to it, little by little."

She felt like she was adapting to her new sword.

At the same time, she also felt like her fighting style had grown more refined. It wasn't that she had trained to perfect her skills, but more that the skills that were already there in her bones and muscles were revealing themselves. Crossing swords with Hagi, it was hard to believe this was the first time they had practiced together.

Among the memories that hadn't resurfaced yet, perhaps there was a time when they had learned how to fence together.

"Saya-neechan, good job."

"Riku."

As she took the towel her little brother held out to her, Saya's eyes grew wide. Dressed in a tailored tweed jacket, vest, and culottes, Riku looked like a boy from a fine French family—only not from the twenty first century.

"Umm . . . Children's festival?" Saya guessed.

"Neechan, that's mean!"

Riku stood proud and tugged the cuffs of his sleeves.

"Joel gave me some of his old clothes."

"Really? They look nice on you. Don't you think so?"

Saya was obviously seeking a confirming opinion and Hagi nodded his head in silence.

The suit also looked a lot like the clothes Hagi had been wearing when they met for the first time at the Zoo. It wasn't that

strange, considering that Joel was a descendent of the royal Goldschmidt family and of the former head of the Zoo.

Just like Hagi and Joel, Riku looked good in the clothes of aristocrats. Saya felt like Western European garb didn't seem right on Asian people, but with his chestnut-colored hair, pale skin, and delicate features, Riku might have been the exception to this rule.

Of course, it would have been different if they were back in the surroundings of Okinawa, rather than an apartment in the historical city of Paris. They were in the central garden, surrounded on all sides by typical five-story apartment buildings with shrubs, flowers, and herbs growing between them. The brick-and-mortar walls might have stood there for a hundred years or more.

Besides Saya and the others, there were no other residents in the apartment building.

This was one of the properties owned by Joel, the always-prepared leader of Red Shield. There were more buildings and plots owned under the Goldschmidt name dotting Paris than fingers on two hands.

And it wasn't only Paris—Joel owned assets all over France, England, Germany, Italy, and elsewhere. To a girl like Saya, raised at a restaurant and drinking hole in Okinawa for the past year, Joel seemed to have more money than she could possibly imagine.

Joel had made his investments for the sake of Red Shield.

To protect people from the Chiropterans—and to destroy Diva.

"Diva . . ." Saya said softly. Catching herself speaking aloud, Saya covered her mouth with the towel.

The uniquely constructed blade of her katana shone in the sunlight.

To kill her blood sister, the mother of the Chiropterans, was the mission Saya had given herself.

After meeting her again at the Zoo in Bordeaux for the first time in a century, Saya wondered where her sister was now.

"Why don't we stop here for today?"

Saya shook her head at the flat tone of Hagi's questions.

"I'm OK. Let's go for a little longer."

"If that is what you wish."

Hagi crouched low as his dagger spun in his palm, and he moved close to the entrance to the building. The air suddenly filled with electric tension.

The training with Hagi started once again. Saya slowly raised the point of her sword.

The loud creak of a hinge only vaguely distracted the two combatants.

They both moved forward at the same time.

Her bare blade locked fangs with his cross-shaped dagger.

The rusty hinge made a nasty squeak.

Kai pushed open the back door and caught his breath when he saw the spectacle taking place in the central garden.

He saw a larger figure and a smaller figure moving around so quickly, it was like watching two wild animals.

He could hear the continuous sound of forged metal against metal. Never was there a pause.

"Good morning, Kai-niichan."

"Hey . . ."

Riku looked up after his brother's halfhearted response. Kai was unable to tear his eyes off of the battle going on between their sister and her attendant.

No, that wasn't accurate. They moved too fast for a normal human's eyes to follow.

Her only real function was to exterminate Chiropterans.

When the inexperienced attack a beast . . .

Kai reached his right hand behind his back and confirmed the presence of cold steel. His fingers touched the grip of the weighty automatic pistol tucked in his belt and hidden under the hem of his shirt. He sensed the killing power of the weapon.

However, as deadly as it was to people, it wasn't much use when fighting Chiropterans.

Kai remembered the painful events of the previous week. David and the other agents had fought bravely against a group of Chiropterans calling themselves "Schiff" at the Red Shield headquarters. Yet, the only Schiff slaughtered had been killed by Saya's sword. The surface of the ship had been covered with dead human bodies.

The dozens of well-armed professionals had done all they could to counter the group of Chiropterans. Their only limit had been that of human abilities. David and the other agents must have known that, but still had chosen to support Saya in the fight.

Kai hadn't been able to help in that battle. He had been protecting his brother, and the bullets that had exited the muzzle of his gun had never entered the flesh of the enemy.

On the other hand, as a simple human, maybe his duties *should* have been limited to keeping his little brother safe. And now Riku was—

Kai looked down at his brother, unconsciously wrinkling his forehead. "What the hell are you wearing? What is it? Children's festival?"

The noble garments actually didn't look bad on him, but they were far from normal.

"Gosh . . . Saya-neechan said the same thing!"

Riku's cheeks puffed out in frustration just like they had when the family had lived in Okinawa.

Chevalier—it was hard to imagine that Riku's body would never know sleep or death like the handsome young man crossing swords with his sister right now.

Laughing, Kai felt a weight lift from his chest, and he looked up into the sky. There was no break in the blanket of clouds, but it wasn't very thick.

"It's not going to rain, is it?" He asked.

"Are you going somewhere?" Riku responded.

"Yeah. There's nothing to do sitting around here all day."

They hadn't been in Paris long enough for Kai to grow accustomed to his surroundings, so what better diversion than taking a look around? What he really wanted to do was ride his motorcycle along an ocean highway, but, sadly, that wasn't possible right now.

"Why don't you take Saya-neechan with you?"

Kai smiled bitterly at his brother's naive suggestion.

He couldn't say anything immediately, as Riku's eyes looked so sincere.

"I wouldn't want to interrupt her practice."

"I think she needs to take a break every once in a while. Ever since we got here she hasn't stopped . . ." Worried, Riku looked at his sister.

The soles of her shoes slid across the stone-paved ground and as she readjusted her grip, her determination was clear in her stance.

Kai glanced at Riku, then at their sister, before starting to walk across the garden in silence.

She was completely focused on her swordplay. She didn't even notice him.

With the sounds of their weapons clanging at his back, Kai walked through the arch-shaped passageway that led to the street.

With no particular place to go, Kai let his feet carry him where there seemed to be the most people.

The sun chased the clouds across the sky, illuminating the Champs Élysées beautifully as Kai looked down from above.

Kai squinted as he placed an elbow above the telescope bolted to the ground. As could be expected, the wind was strong. The steel tower designed by Gustave Eiffel was three hundred twenty-four meters tall. This second platform he was on was about one hundred meters above the ground.

To gaze at the most famous city in the world from the most famous tower in the world had gotten Kai into the elevator up—his other option would have been joining the purists who elected

to take the stairs. There seemed to be much activity down at the Palais de Chaillot and surrounding Trocadéro Park.

He could hear people speaking English and, of course, French, but a conversation in Japanese stuck out among the chattering from the observation deck.

Kai looked around, and saw people wearing fashions from all over the world.

A group of middle-aged and older Japanese tourists were listening to two male uniformed guides—the Arabic-looking one was Zidane and the white one was Libery—speaking to them in their native tongue as they walked quickly around the group.

The loud laughter coming from another group of men and women made Kai assume they were Americans.

Among them Kai's eyes fell on one in particular.

She wasn't wearing clothes that brought a lot of attention to her. Her monklike jacket was quite plain.

But Kai couldn't ignore her. It was because he knew who she was.

"That girl . . ."

Her hood was pulled up, but he saw the long hair flowing out of it. It was the color of desert sand. Her big blues eyes were like two lakes staring forward, and her fingers, intermeshed in front of her, didn't move.

He thought her name was Aurélien. She was one of the Chiropterans who called themselves "Schiff."

Perhaps she was so still and quiet up in this steel tower because she was observing the scenery below. She had been interrupted by the noisy tourists.

A group of little French soccer players were kicking around a soccer ball when it got away from them and hit her leg.

It wasn't a real soccer ball, but one made of spongy foam. It shouldn't have been a big deal, but Kai couldn't help but hold his breath.

This was a creature that drank human blood to live.

He moved his right hand to his back, near his gun, but could only watch nervously for what would happen next. In the worst-case scenario, he would be forced to fight a Chiropteran.

She could easily have crushed the children's skulls with her bare hands, but instead she chose to pick up the soccer ball.

"Thanks."

The boy who took the ball from her gloved hands smiled at her, revealing a chipped front tooth, and then turned to rejoin his friends.

The Schiff girl watched him run off.

"... Thanks?"

She repeated the word quietly, as if she wasn't sure what it meant. Her expression was that of a little girl.

Kai released his sweaty palm from the pistol's grip. As Aurélien stumbled on the word, confused, Kai could see Saya. The baby-ish Saya right when she joined the Miyagusuku family. In no way could he see a Chiropteran. A Chiropteran . . . ? Kai didn't think so. That wasn't the problem. The true Saya was . . . Aurélien took another look at the city below and then headed toward the stairwell.

+

During crowded holidays, the wait for tourists to ride the Eiffel Tower elevator down could be two or three hours. But Kai couldn't afford to wait.

Just as Louis had taught him, Kai kept at least three people between him and the girl he was tailing.

He wasn't really sure why he had decided to follow her.

He might have been able to find a clue about the Schiff, who had been trying to get to Saya. In that case, he should probably have let David know what he was up to. But Kai felt drawn to this unusual Chiropteran, who hardly even seemed like a Chiropteran, and he stayed on her tail.

At least this would have been a way to kill some time.

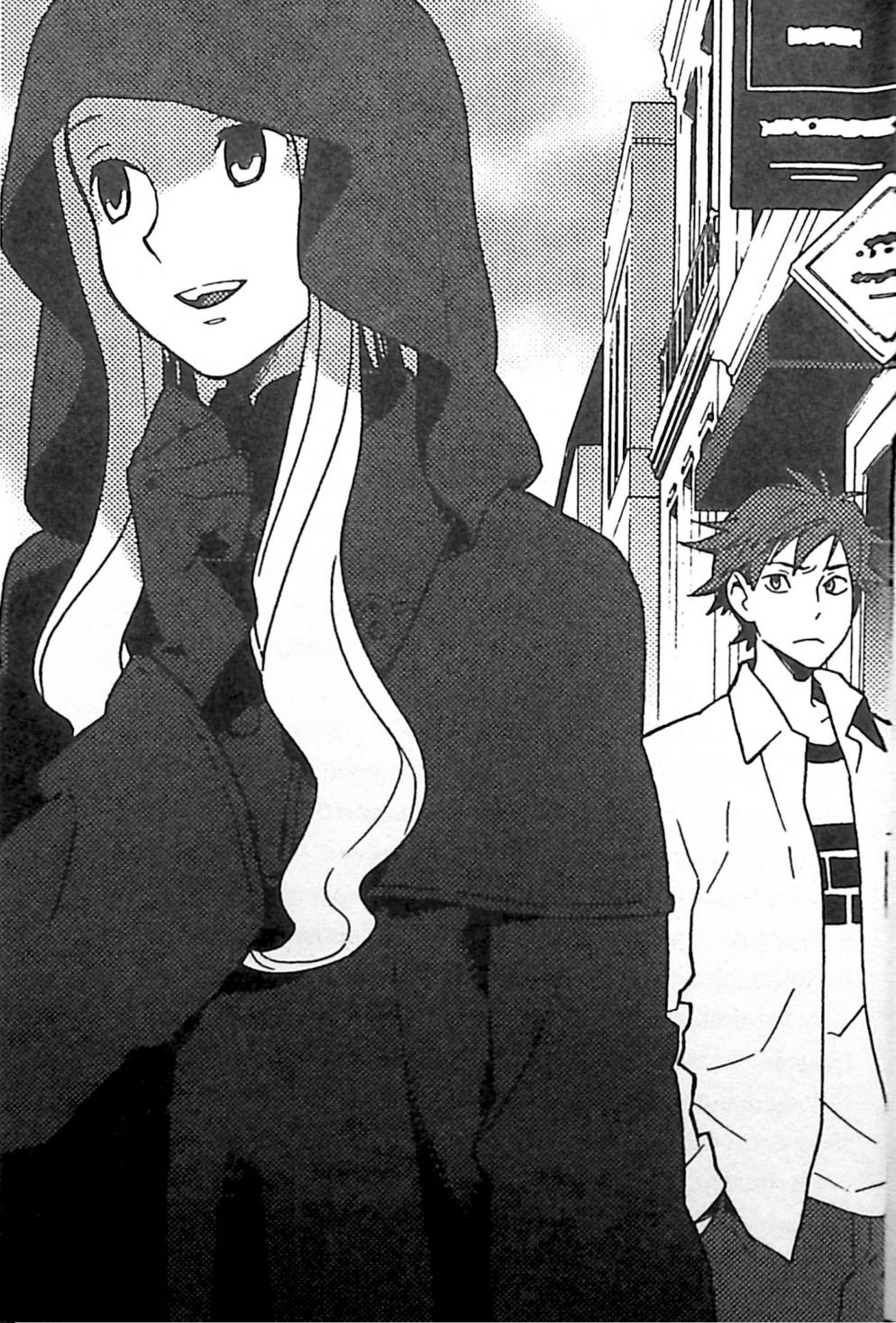
Kai had expected Aurélien to be joined by the other Schiff when she stepped back onto solid ground. But instead, she continued walking on her own toward town.

She looked at dresses and shoes in shop windows with innocent curiosity. She jumped and ran away when a beagle taking a walk with its owner barked at her. She also fled when the owner at a flower shop asked her a question.

What's up with that? wondered Kai. She acted like a country girl dropped off in the city for the very first time: an anxious and curious child on her first adventure.

At first Kai was concerned that, with the Schiff's self-proclaimed heightened senses, she would detect the fact she was being followed; but the more he watched her, the less he felt he needed to be concerned.

He must have walked around the city observing her for nearly an hour.



Kai noticed that the atmosphere of the neighborhood had changed.

They had gotten away from the open cafés and designer boutiques and were in more of a back alley. Paris was also known for these places. Here, shadows fell across the stone-paved street indelibly impregnated with the smell of rotting food and alcohol.

Both walls of the alley were spray painted with layers of graffiti, telling Kai that if this wasn't the slum, then they were close to one.

So maybe this was where she was going to meet the others. Kai could feel his heart pound, and he allowed a little more space between himself and his mark.

Aurélien turned a corner.

Kai waited ten seconds before he poked his head into the alley.

He wasn't expecting the scene he witnessed.

The alley was a dead end and he saw three figures. One of them was Aurélien, and the other two were men in their twenties. They weren't Schiff. From Kai's perspective, they looked human, and the lowest form of human, at that.

"Little kids shouldn't be playing around here. Didn't your tour guide warn you? This area is dangerous."

The man scolding Aurélien had some vicious-looking tattoos covering both arms. He held a knife close to Aurélien's face and turned it menacingly in his right hand. The other man had his back to Kai, not looking out for passersby. He had probably positioned himself to grab the girl if she tried to make a break for it. Surely they had chosen this spot for the lack of pedestrian traffic. These weren't amateurs.

Unfortunately for them, a passerby was already there.

. . . *Dumbasses*, thought Kai.

These rats didn't realize they had crossed paths with a tiger. Smarter individuals would have understood that they were putting their lives on the line. Aurélien didn't appear to be carrying any weapons, but Kai knew that her hand could transform into a Chiropteran claw at will.

"I don't have any money." Aurélien was pressed up against the wall by a hand around her neck. She looked like she was in pain.

If she didn't have money, then she must have snuck onto the observation deck of the Eiffel Tower without paying. But there wasn't time to be worrying about that now.

Kai reluctantly exposed himself from his hiding spot at the corner.

His plan had changed.

It wasn't the thought of victims-to-be, but of the victim right now that got Kai's body moving. Chiropteran or human, it was clear who the bad guy was here.

"Hey, you!" He was doing them a favor. He let them know he was coming.

"Hunh?" The first guy turned around, only to be laid out by Kai's fist to his face. Kai stepped over the man's back and moved closer to the other mugger.

This one had a knife, but it took him at least a second to grasp what was going on. By the time that happened, Kai was already kicking his right wrist.

The folding knife flew through the air in a high arc.

In a split second, Kai grabbed the thug by the collar of his leather jacket and pulled him around. The man jeered at Kai,

until he tripped over the legs of his buddy—who was still lying on the ground—and landed on his tailbone.

"D-damn you . . . you slant-eye!" The thug's face was bright red as he attempted to lift himself up, but then he suddenly froze in place.

He had looked up to see the dark glimmer of the muzzle of Kai's pistol pointed at his forehead.

"Get outta here."

" . . . Watch your back, kid."

Having the last word was a sign of empty strength all over the world. And it was probably too much to expect for a mugger like this to have the real *esprit* of the people of France.

The thug picked up his still-groggy partner and dragged him around the corner. Once Kai was sure they were gone, he moved the mouth of his pistol from the end of the alley toward Aurélien.

She didn't move away, but just stared at a single point on the ground. She didn't seem to understand that a deadly weapon was pointed at her face.

Kai followed her gaze and saw she was looking at some black specks scattered on the cobblestones. They were drops of blood, left behind by the thug that Kai had punched in the face.

It was like her eyes could only see the spilled blood on the ground, and nothing else. From the sweat beading on her forehead, Kai could tell she was motivated by some sort of hunger.

"Hey, don't tell me . . . is blood what you want?" he asked.

"Yes."

The two poor excuses for men had been able to overpower her because her body was weak from hunger. He had seen Saya

getting periodic blood transfusions and knew that when she didn't, her strength crumbled.

Nevertheless, the difference in power was clear. Hungry as she was, she could have cut those hoodlums clean in two with a flick of her wrist.

"You're a Chiropteran, huh? If you wanted blood, why didn't you just kill those guys?"

That question seemed to stir up some memory in the girl. She tore her eyes off the blood on the ground and hung her head in shame.

"I . . . don't want to kill anymore."

She looked pained, as if she were carrying a heavy burden.

Kai had seen the same expression on Saya's face.

"Nobody. Not anymore . . ." Aurélien muttered it a second time as if to convince herself.

Just then, the sun broke through the clouds that had blanketed the sky all morning and touched the top of her head.

Aurélien's mouth opened to scream, but no sound came out. Her throat tightened and convulsed.

"What's wrong?" asked Kai.

Aurélien quickly pulled up her hood, covering her head from the sun's rays, and seemingly unaware of Kai's extended hand, she rolled into the shadow of a garbage can.

She fell over on her side like she had been hit with a baseball bat, and Kai felt himself go into panic mode. With his gun still in his hand, he looked closely at the girl. She had apparently passed out.

"What's going on . . . ?"

His image of her as a Chiropteran was falling away in pieces.

Hesitantly, Kai found himself reevaluating the situation. This girl had been targeting Saya's blood, had attacked Red Shield, and had contributed to Riku's injuries.

But looking at her now, he saw none of that raw viciousness. Still, she was a Chiropteran. There was no doubt about it. On the other hand, she was weak enough to have passed out.

Kai thought about it for a full minute before giving in.

"What else can I do?"

He returned his pistol to his belt and mumbled the excuse to himself as he scratched his reddish-brown hair. Either way, he couldn't just leave her like this.

The darkness hadn't been so bad.

The steel bars and belts that had restrained her for so long weren't so dreadful, either.

The darkness had been safe, for the light of the sun was like harmful radiation to the skin of the Schiff. The straps and bars of the cell could easily have been destroyed, but back then, her thought was to fulfill her purpose—to cause pain.

They had sustained injuries as they practiced combat, but they had healed quickly, and there was never any permanent damage. They had not fought in order to stay alive, but to demonstrate their worth to the humans.

It wasn't a completely meaningless exercise.

As a rule, inside Kilbed—a cold, rectangular place, though she didn't know that until she saw it later from the outside—

she and her brothers and sisters followed the orders given to them.

What had changed that had been knowledge.

They had discovered the unimaginable in a document they had been allowed to see. Various climates and terrains, human history and culture . . . when they had found out about those things it had been like night turning to day for the very first time. Aurélien remembered it was like the landscape had completely changed.

It was a sign.

There was a big and beautiful world outside of Kilbed.

They had wanted to see it.

That was what she had thought. Her desire had affected her body.

The pain from the practice battles she fought wasn't so bad, thanks to the drugs that they were forced to take. With this hope came a new feeling. Dread.

What had been concrete and real was the deaths of her siblings.

She had seen the cracks in the skin of her dead brothers as they carried them off. Red crystals burned just below the surface. Boris had been pleased with the results of his experiments, but Aurélien was unable to get a handle on the fear it stirred in her.

They would also die—

Her premonition of their inevitable demise recurred over and over, making her extremely anxious.

I want to live . . . I want to live . . . I want to live . . . So I must do something about it!

She hadn't known about her origins at that time, but that might have been the first time she had truly felt a desire to stay alive.

It had been the same for the others.

Carmen, Moses, Ghee, Lulu, Dars, Gudrif, Yan, Gestas, Dismas. All were thinking the same thing.

"Let's go."

It was Moses who had said it.

"I don't trust the humans. But I want to believe in a word I see in their books. It's 'hope.'"

With no hesitation, Aurélien had stood up.

She could not withstand the sun. Yet, the light from the freedom of the outside shone inside, Aurélien had felt.

From within the darkness, a glittering light.

Aurélien began to walk toward that light.

Aurélien opened her eyes.

Had she been sleeping?

No, Schiff didn't sleep.

The sunlight must have caused a shock to her system and made her lose consciousness.

"Are you awake?"

The voice calling to her helped bring her to her senses.

As she rose, she realized she was in the shadow behind a building along the shopping arcade. She felt safe.

". . . Did *you* help me?"

Sitting next to her was a human with reddish hair. He was a boy in his teens. She thought he could be classified as Asian. He had chased off the other humans who had demanded money from her.

He must have known the sun's rays were harmful to her and carried her here.

"It's because I want to talk to you." His tone was blunt, but he didn't reach for his gun.

"Talk?"

"Yeah."

"Aren't you going to call your group?"

She remembered this boy from the ship where Yan had been killed. He was there with Saya and her Chevalier. He was the enemy.

"If I was going to call them I would have done it already."

"..." Aurélien didn't respond. She looked at the gutter by the stone-paved road.

A break in the clouds allowed the sunlight to reach through. She could clearly see the colors of the weeds and moss. She stared hard at the line of ants walking along the gutter.

The grass and the insects lived and basked in the sunlight.

It was only the descendants of Diva who were trapped in their protective cells of darkness, only able to come out under the cloak of night.

Even escaping the prison that was Kilbed didn't mean they were able to do more than roam the night. They could walk outside during the day only if it was cloudy, with their hoods up, completely hiding their faces.

Right now, Moses and the others should be resting at an abandoned church outside of town. There was no telling how angry and worried Carmen would be if he knew his little sister had snuck away from their safe house to sightsee around Paris. He hated all humans and the world that they made for themselves. His anger could be blamed on Boris and the other humans at the

detestable Kilbed. Maybe he simply preferred to see them as the providers of the blood that his kind needed to live.

Aurélien felt lucky that he wasn't here right now.

This boy sitting next to her with the gruff demeanor—he had a wrinkle between his eyebrows similar to Carmen—Aurélien realized that she didn't want him to get hurt.

"Hey."

He spoke directly to her.

"You, Schiff—what are you?"

"I don't know." Aurélien spoke the truth. She wondered the same thing herself. "I'd like to ask you. What are humans?"

Aurélien looked up at Kai like a child asking, "What is God?" of her parents.

It must have seemed like a very curious thing to ask. The boy didn't answer her question, but asked in return, "Why would you ask something like that?"

"We were created by humans. In a cold place far north of here. Everyone calls it Kilbed."

From the shadow of the alleyway, Aurélien was able to glimpse the main street beyond. Crowds of people were walking this way and that way. Light skin, dark skin, elderly, young, men, women . . . there had been many people at Kilbed, too.

"Rosie was head of training, Smith and Anthony were in charge of medical care, Mifune was the tactics and strategy teacher, Brenda taught us fundamentals . . . besides us, everyone there was human."

The boy's gruff expression faltered, showing his confusion.

"What the hell are you talking about?"

"About the Schiff. We were made to fight. Maybe."

"Maybe?"

Aurélien nodded her head. There wasn't a single thing she was completely sure about. Only that the little garden protected from the sun's rays had been their only refuge, and passing the days there had ultimately meant no more than fighting. They fought against monsters called "mice," and when they killed one, they were rewarded with another twenty-four hours of life.

"Even when our flesh was torn and our bones were shattered, our bodies soon returned to normal. I didn't think it was possible to die. I thought killing the enemies they sent our way was our purpose. But . . ."

Aurélien's eyes clouded with fear, and she stared at the red-tinged surface of the road. Evening was approaching. The setting sun was the same color as the Thorn.

"Then I realized that we could die, too. Red cracks appeared on the skin of my people, then their bodies would get hard like crystal before they died. We call that the Thorn."

The image of Ghee's smiling face entered her mind.

He had hidden the web of red lines on his beautiful cheeks from his siblings and fought bravely against the Chevaliers.

He had died thinking only of the future of his brothers and sisters.

When Moses had proposed the idea of leaving Kilbed, Ghee had been his most enthusiastic supporter.

No one knew when death would come. When Ghee's had, he had wished his siblings hope in making their way in the outside world.

Tearing off their restraints and breaking out of their prison cells had been simple work. So was massacring the staff and guards of Kilbed.

The torture techniques Mifune had taught them had come in handy: they had entered the chief's office and sliced the tendons in his arms and legs, not only preventing him from moving, but also making it easier for them to get information out of him. The pride and dignity he had shown the day before had disappeared as Boris cried and screamed and begged for his life. But, after he had spilled everything he knew to them, Boris had gone quiet and smiled a strange satisfied smile, like someone who knew the dog that had bitten him would soon be put down.

—There is no hope for the likes of you. I hope you die in pain and despair.

Almost before Boris had finished speaking, a spike had left Moses's hand, flying into Boris's open mouth and through the back of his skull before planting itself deep in the rear wall of the office. It took quite a while for Boris's death throes to finally stop.

"We knew, then. From the time we were born we had existed only to be tossed away when we were no longer useful." Thinking about the dead members of their group was too much to bear. They had been born and had lived, and Aurélien wanted to make some memorial to their brief lives.

But she didn't know what she could possibly do . . . and there wasn't a lot of time to try and find out, nor to construct it.

Aurélien pulled back her hood, revealing her face.

"Hey!"

"It's all right. I'm in the shade." Seeing the boy worry about her made Aurélien happy. She smiled and moved her blond hair back with her hand. Then she turned her head slightly, showing her left cheek to the boy sitting beside her.

His eyes grew wide. "Is that . . . ?"

"This is the Thorn."

The marks on her cheek were the color of the flesh of a pomegranate.

Today, she had not left her group and come to the city in the daytime simply to satisfy her curiosity. She had too much pent-up energy, and couldn't bring herself to just stand around. Once she had known her time was limited, she was surprised at how many things she wanted to know and see and feel and hear. The prospect of satisfying one of those desires had been enough to coax Aurélien to come to the city alone.

She felt how far the Thorn had crawled across her skin with her finger before pulling her hood back over her head.

"In order to heal this, we need blood. The same blood we originated from . . . either Diva's, or—"

"—Saya's blood." His lips had hardly moved, and the words came out of his mouth like a grumble. From the way he looked, Aurélien understood that Saya was very important to this boy.

But to break this curse of the Schiff, she needed this Saya's blood . . .

Perhaps this was what Boris had meant. What would help save the Schiff would cause this boy great pain.

He would fight the Schiff to defend Saya.

The boy stood up. Aurélien thought he was going to pull out his pistol, but the hand he extended toward her was empty.

"Can you stand?"

"Huh?"

"If you need Saya's blood, I will ask her for you."

Aurélien could hardly believe what she was hearing.

For a moment she thought this Asian boy didn't know what he was saying, but there was no uncertainty in his face.

Yet, Saya was precious to him. So then how could he . . .

She must have looked bewildered. He responded to that with a slight grin. "Stealing isn't the only way to get something. There is also such a thing as sharing."

"Sharing . . . ?" She knew the meaning of the word, but had no understanding of it in practical use. Could he really be saying that they could find what they needed without hurting anyone?

"Do you mean that we don't have to fight and kill and take?"

Her humble question made the boy's smile grow wider. "All you have to do is say thank you."

". . . Thank you?"

Words of gratitude. Something you say when you receive something from another person, or someone helps you.

Thank you—the words resonated beautifully.

This was the first time she had thought of living as anything besides simply taking that which she wanted from others. That was how Carmen and Moses thought. In order to satisfy their hunger, they attacked humans. They attacked Saya to heal the Thorn. If they didn't, they wouldn't live much longer.

That was how Aurélien, too, had learned to think.

Killing others to benefit oneself was a deplorable act. The people at Kilbed didn't matter, but those who had nothing to do with the Schiff—Aurélien had only followed Carmen because she didn't know any other way. There had been no other choice.

And now, for the first time in her life, this boy had shown Aurélien a different way. She could keep living with no stealing or strife. It might have been a different path than that of Carmen and the others, but it was what Aurélien wanted.

"Can't you stand? OK, then, hop on." The boy turned his back to her and knelt down once again.

Aurélien was bewildered at the boy placing himself in such a defenseless position. He just told her to "hop on," but Aurélien wasn't sure what she was expected to do. People weren't horses.

"I'll carry you. Don't worry, just get on."

"All right . . ."

Still very weak, Aurélien proceeded to step onto the boy's back in an effort to get her legs up around his shoulders.

"Not like that." It seemed he had a different technique in mind.

"What should I do?"

"Piggyback . . . do you understand? Put your arms over my shoulders and around my neck . . . let's just give it a shot. I can carry you."

"Like this?"

Just as he had instructed, Aurélien let all her body weight rest on his back and then suddenly felt herself being carried. She thought she was going to slip off of him, but she curled her legs around his waist, and he wrapped his arms under them.

"It's almost nighttime, but you should still put your hood up."

"OK." Aurélien replied reservedly as he started walking at a surprisingly brisk pace. She had always regarded humans as weak, so she was surprised by the strength this boy showed. Seeing the world from this height gave Aurélien new perspective.

"Can you tell me your name?" she asked him.

"Kai Miyagusuku. What's yours?"

". . . Aurélien."

Her name had never felt like it carried any weight or meaning. At least it hadn't at Kilbed. There was no affection to the name Aurélien when Boris gave it to her. And yet, for some reason, revealing her name to him was just a little bit exciting. Aurélien let the strength drain from her body, and she laid her cheek against Kai's shoulder.

It was warm.

The sun went down quickly as they headed toward their apartment.

Kai was in no real hurry.

He was thinking about what kind of look he should give to get everyone to welcome the *guest* riding on his back.

David and Saya would accept her presence, wouldn't they?

A lot of the people they passed on the sidewalk looked like they were heading home from work. Yet, no one was walking at the speed most Japanese naturally do. The young college students and women in business suits strolling toward the art nouveau

entry to the Metro subway looked as if the train schedule was the last thing on their minds.

The tasty aroma of cooking food filled the air.

It must have been about dinnertime. They walked in front of a café Kai knew was frequented by famous artists and photographers.

Right now Louis was probably heating up something in a pot in the kitchen of their apartment. Cooking was his job, and the results were always worth looking forward to.

On the ship from Okinawa to Russia Riku often could be found at his side peeling vegetables and helping wash the dishes. Where Kai had never really concerned himself with the flavor of food, Riku's tastes were well attuned. He was a good helper, memorized recipes quickly, and would be a better successor to the restaurant pub than his older brother.

Riku didn't do any cooking now.

He had lost interest in anything having to do with food. A Chevalier didn't need anything besides human blood to live.

"You know, my little brother almost died." Kai himself was surprised at his sudden statement, but he continued. "But Saya's blood . . ."

"Helped?"

Aurélien's voice was focused. She was searching for a way to live.

"Yeah. He turned into what they call a 'Chevalier.' But it doesn't seem to have really changed him. He seems unsure of himself, but he was like that before."

Chevaliers like Hagi and Karl had human bodies, but also had extraordinary abilities. Both men had had their bodies for a long

time; but, where Hagi carried the demeanor of a wise sage, Karl was like a finely sharpened madman.

Riku was different than them.

He was still the junior-high-school student from Okinawa. His flesh was immortal like a Chiropteran's, but he didn't have the superhuman strength or abilities of Hagi or Saya yet. Julia was unable to determine if the transformation was not yet complete, or if this was the state Riku would be in forever.

However, they knew one thing for sure.

"He's not human anymore. He's a Chiropteran. But, more important than that, I am still his big brother." The words came out slowly as Kai bit down on each one before letting it leave his lips. Kai noticed Aurélien's silence. "I know as a regular person, there isn't so much I can do for Riku and Saya . . . just make sure they have a place to call home, where I can keep them safe."

"I think I would be happy." The sincerity of Aurélien's words pierced Kai's chest. ". . . If there was someone like you always waiting for me to come home."

". . . Happy, huh?" Kai asked.

"I am happy I was able to talk with you today."

"We'll be able to do it again after today, too." Kai forced a light chuckle. Aurélien's words sounded like something people said when they weren't going to see each other again.

He continued walking in silence, recalling some memories of life in Okinawa.

Her environment had made Saya a bright and outgoing girl. She had been such a dedicated member of the track team and no

one could believe her voracious appetite. She could empty her giant bento box of its lunch without a grain of rice left behind.

However, Kai now realized something. Sometimes that energetic look of hers had showed hints of anxiety.

He had a hard time remembering the exact moments, but it had seemed as if she didn't know herself. Kai had always figured that even living life not knowing what was normal or expected, one would be able to fill in the gaps somehow.

But sometimes Saya didn't say anything, and her eyes looked very sad.

Perhaps Kai wasn't able to look at Aurélien as an enemy because her eyes looked so similar to Saya's. She, too, didn't know much about herself or the world around her.

The heat from Aurélien's body on Kai's back reminded him of riding on the highway on his motorcycle with Saya. He remembered the burning of the setting sun as the salty wind hit his face.

"... Thank you, Kai."

Aurélien's words, followed by a long sigh, were faint, but stronger than a few minutes earlier.

Kai laughed. "You said it too early. You still don't know how to use 'thank you.'" It was because he hadn't taught her properly.

For now, they had to meet with Saya and come to an understanding, and then, when they were able to heal her of the Thorn—that's when he wanted to hear her say "thank you."

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They had taken short breaks throughout the day but, the training they had continued since the morning had finally come to an end.

"Hey-oh! Dinnertime!"

Louis poked his head out the door and yelled. "I have been calling for you for a while now!"

"Sorry!"

Saya apologized to the heavyset black man as she returned her katana to its scabbard. If the doorway had been any narrower, he might have had a hard time getting through it.

She could have kept practicing, but meals were essential. Saya wanted her body to be in perfect shape for battle, so it had to be properly fueled. Because she hadn't perfected her abilities sooner, the blood of George and Hagi and many members of Red Shield had been spilled. She could no longer afford to be weak.

"Hagi, that's enough for today. Thank you."

"Yes."

The young man returned his dagger to a pocket inside his jacket. He would act as her sparring partner whenever and for however long she wished. But by this time of day his cello was longing for the hands of its master.

Riku had sat on the stairs leading to the doorway all day with a drawn-out look of grief on his face. "I can't believe you would forget dinner, Saya-neechan."

"What's that supposed to mean?" At first she thought he meant it as a joke, but his expression remained serious.

"For me there are lots of things more important than eating," she countered. Just as she jutted out her chin to maintain what

dignity she had left, her stomach chimed in with a dissenting opinion. *Grumble.* The sad rumbling of her stomach was enough to make Saya slam her eyes shut in embarassment.

A sweet smile filled Riku's face.

"Well, eating is obviously important, too."

"Yeah . . . I guess."

As Saya stepped on the stairs and tried to compose her face, Riku moved toward the street as if he were being pulled. Louis opened the door, laughing out loud.

Suddenly, Hagi's footsteps stopped.

At that moment, Saya smelled it, too.

". . . Riku, Louis-san, get inside."

"What's the matter?"

Saya responded to Louis's question by turning back around and gripping her katana by the handle.

It was the smell of a Chiropteran. And close by.

Saya moved from the center garden toward the arch that led to the street as Hagi unsheathed the dagger he had only just put away.

"Saya."

"I know."

Saya crouched low and pulled her sword from its sheath.

That she hadn't been able to sense it until it had reached this close distance meant it wasn't an average Chiropteran.

Maybe a Chevalier, or maybe a Schiff—

The shadow of a figure darkened the round entrance.

The light from the windows above fell upon him, and Saya's shock drained all the strength from her arms.

"Kai . . . ?"

"Yo."

For as long as she had known him, he had never been able to give a proper "I'm home" upon his return.

But Kai was not alone.

Riding on his back and looking right at her was a girl, probably fifteen or sixteen years old. She recognized the face under the hood as one of the Chiropterans who called themselves the Schiff.

"No!"

Kai yelled just as the young man's dagger glinted a flash as it left his fingertips.

Saya drew her sword forward with incredible speed.

Cring! A metallic spark flickered in the air.

With an upward swing, the blade of her sword intercepted the path of Hagi's dagger, which would have skimmed passed Kai's head and planted itself in the girl's skull.

"Hagi, stop!"

Hagi was right in using his daggers against a Chiropteran, but if Kai was a hostage, it would have been careless to interfere.

Once she was sure that Hagi was not going to propel the second dagger that had suddenly appeared in his hand, Saya looked closely at Kai and the girl once again.

"Let go of Kai."

"It's not what you think, Saya!" Kai responded, although she had spoken to the Schiff. "This girl . . . Aurélien is not our enemy!"

Perhaps it was to ensure everyone in the center garden could hear him that Kai spoke so loudly.

"Kai . . ."

Shocked by what he had said, it took a few moments for Saya to recover her words.

". . . Kai, she's a Chiropteran."

It wasn't clear what Kai's intentions were as the Chiropteran clung to his shoulders. Aurélien's anxious and pained face didn't appear to have the strength of a Chiropteran on the attack.

Still, how could Kai make such a ridiculous claim?

"Have you already forgotten? It wasn't that long ago that she and her Schiff buddies tried to kill me. They hurt Riku and killed all those Red Shield agents."

"No, I haven't." Kai shook his head, almost painfully.

Saya stayed quiet. The Schiff girl was looking straight at her. Those beautiful, sparkling eyes stared at her critically. Saya returned the harsh stare, and the girl turned away, frightened, and squeezed her arms tighter around Kai's neck.

"What's wrong? Is it getting worse?"

Saya found Kai's kindness to Aurélien, who had her head buried in his back, rather irritating.

"Kai, Chiropterans are the enemy. This is something you already know."

"That might be true, but . . . I just want you to listen to what I have to say."

"There's nothing to discuss." Saya laid the empty scabbard down on the stone pathway.

She grasped the katana with both hands. In the faint moonlight, the blade shivered blue in anticipation of battle.

Kai glared at the sword. "Why are you going to fight?"

"It's not my choice." Saya spat the words out like she was chewing on rocks. "If I didn't run away from my fights, then Father and Riku would still be alive and normal like before. I used to be a coward . . ."

"Neechan, I . . ." Riku tried to say something, but his voice squeezed shut.

He understood better than anyone that he was no longer a human. Perhaps he wanted to reassure Saya that some things about him hadn't changed.

Kai seemed to hesitate as he looked at his dejected brother, but it wasn't enough to make him fold. He adjusted his body in anticipation of protecting the girl still on his back.

"You can't even talk it out?"

Saya bristled. How could Kai make her the one at fault?

"To protect everyone from Chiropterans. This is what I have to do!"

"Listen! Is that all there is?" Kai's voice was also feverish. "To fight is what you must do. But it wasn't you who decided that, was it?"

Saya remained quiet for a few moments. She had heard the same words from a Chiropteran disguised as a human named Liza back in Yekaterinburg, Russia.

Yet, something was different now.

Now, she gripped her katana of her own will.

"I can't do it. I let Diva get away . . . It is my fault many were killed, and more are still dying."

The seeds she had spread had spawned an ominous blue rose that sucked the blood of humans. The duty of resolving this could

not be left to other hands.

"David-san and all of Red Shield are fighting to destroy Diva and the Chiropterans. They are all fighting for my sake."

Before she had known about her past, she had fought because she had no other choice. Being forced to fight under those circumstances couldn't have been more frightening, and the thought of running away had entered her mind more than once or twice. Now she was trying to make up for her past mistakes.

Red Shield had paid in blood for the disaster responsible for scattering them all over the world over a century ago. David, and Louis, and Julia—they had all lost people close to them because of Chiropterans. Kai understood that to Saya, to waive a chance to battle a Chiropteran was the same as betraying her brethren.

Not surprisingly, Kai had trouble finding the words to respond.

"Kai." Aurélien's humble voice splashed in the fountain of silence. "I am pretty sure I am—"

"You'll be OK."

That short phrase seemed to put her at ease. Saya could see that the Schiff girl had put all her faith in Kai.

Saya found herself taken aback by Kai, who was staring concernedly at Aurélien. He had always expressed his joy and anger much more openly than the average person, but never had Saya seen such a look of thoughtful concern on his face.

"Listen, Saya. Until now, I got how humans and Chiropterans were fighting, but it's really more complicated than that."

"..." Saya didn't respond, letting her older brother struggle through putting his thoughts to words.

"Saying that Chiropterans are bad, and so they should be destroyed, just isn't right. If you think about it, there's a hell of a lot of bad humans out there. But there are also good people, right? Just because a Chiropteran's blood flows in someone's veins isn't enough reason to call him an enemy. By that logic, you and Riku are enemies of humans, too."

So, what Kai was trying to say was that there were also good Chiropterans. And that those good Chiropterans were the Schiff? No matter how many times, no matter how he said it, Saya couldn't find a way to believe this was true.

"So why now do you come to this conclusion . . . knowing that my aim is to kill all Chiropterans, that it's my reason to live?" she asked coldly.

"Then . . . then, you!" Irritated by the clash with his thinking, Kai's voice rose to a shout. "Even with a chance to talk it out, you'd rather just ignore reason and go ahead and kill them all, huh?"

Saya could feel her heart constrict, and she moaned silently, imagining Solomon's face as she remembered him from the Zoo, his face overlapping with Kai's.

There was a big difference between the Chiropteran Solomon who didn't like conflict, and Kai, who questioned the conflict between humans and Chiropterans. But both wanted to make bold compromises.

Compared to them, I am . . .

Nothing but a bloodthirsty berserker.

At some point the tip of her sword touched the ground.

"So what would you have me do?! Hagi and I have been fighting this way since forever! Suddenly now we're going to

change everything?!" It had been a long time since she had felt angry words build up in her throat.

A few months earlier, she might have had sympathy for Kai's plea. She might have been able to pull her sword away. But now, she remembered much more, and with those memories, everything had changed.

A hundred years.

A hundred years of fighting Diva and her spawn.

Kai could not fathom the sheer weight of so long a quest.

"So, if they are Chiropterans, you'll kill them all? Not just Diva, but Hagi and Riku too?! Me too, if I were a Chiropteran—"

Kai's tirade stopped short as he realized that Saya didn't plan to continue the conversation.

"You've changed, Kai." The voice that came out of her mouth sounded as if it had been frozen in her lungs.

The old Kai had respected action over words. No matter what problems had resulted, that had been his personal policy, with no exceptions. Now he was making decisions based on empty words, confusing Saya and Hagi.

Kai's rebuttal was cool and contemptuous. "I don't change." His voice wasn't loud, and he spoke in a relaxed tone. Unprepared and tired from the sudden turn of events, Saya remained silent.

If Kai hadn't changed, did it mean that she had?

Could it be that the Saya Otonashi that he had known was completely gone?

"Let's stop right here." The low and rusty voice hit Saya in the back. She turned around to see a tense man wearing a black suit standing in the doorway. His combed-down blond hair and sharp

cheeks gave him a cold look.

"David." At some point Louis came and stood at his side, looking at him sadly. "Somehow they got mixed into this."

"That's how it seems."

The man who had dedicated years of his life to serving Red Shield sent his steely gaze toward Kai and the Schiff girl he carried on his shoulders.

Aurélien hid from his scrutiny, by hiding her eyes behind Kai's back. Neither of them expected what David said next.

"Kai, how long are you planning on standing there? Get inside."

"David-san!" It was Saya who piped in unexpectedly.

To allow Aurélien into the apartment seemed desperately naive—out of character for the usually sensible David.

"Wait a minute," David explained. "Maybe we can maybe get info on the Schiff. You can see she is in no condition to resist."

It was true. Unlike that battle before, Aurélien now appeared weak and exhausted. Perhaps that was why Kai had carried her all the way here.

Saya didn't feel much better, but she knew David understood her position. Colleagues of his had been killed by the Schiff. He would take care of it, so Saya didn't need to control the situation.

On top of that, Saya noticed that David's right hand stayed tucked inside his tailored suit coat. That was where he holstered the large-caliber pistol he carried. Even if something took him by surprise, he wasn't going to let this Chiropteran take him down.

"I want to let Aurélien rest," Kai interjected.

"Use an empty bedroom," David told him. "I'll listen to what you have to say there."

Without responding, Kai began walking. He couldn't handle David not trusting Aurélien.

"This is really squishy."

Aurélien sat up smiling on the mattress Kai had laid her on.

"What's that? Haven't you ever slept on a bed?"

"No. We don't sleep, so there was nothing like this at Kilbed."

Aurélien's honest response to Kai's joking question seemed to suck the air from the room.

Saya stood silently with her back to the wall, observing Aurélien carefully.

David's initial cross-examination of Aurélien had seemed unnecessarily thorough. It seemed like he was saying things to draw Kai back, explaining the situation point by point, explaining their situation and the Schiff's boundaries. At least that was what Saya felt.

Aurélien looked just like a tired girl happy to have the chance to lie down on a soft bed. Maybe Kai had been right. Maybe she was different from Diva's crew.

Along her white cheeks were cracks that looked like the bottom of a dried-up lake. This was the Thorn that the Schiff were so fearful of.

With no means of escape, how could she feel knowing she was at Death's door?

Saya consciously adjusted her grip on her sword.

"I got a hold of Julia. She should arrive soon with word on the recovery."

David nodded, acknowledging Louis who had just walked into the room.

"Roger. Until then, we'll do a shift change. Saya, you too."

"... OK."

It was for surveillance purposes. It also implied that deadly force could be used, if needed.

"Wait a minute. What does Louis mean by 'recovery'?!" Kai stood up from his bedside chair and directed his question at David.

"We will transfer Aurélien to headquarters," David explained. "There Professor Collins and Julia can carefully examine her condition."

"I never heard anything about this!"

David swept away Kai's fists, tugging at his collar with his left hand. His right was still on his pistol. "Cool down. We are not at a point where we can fully trust her yet. The members of Red Shield are warm blooded, and the Schiff killed their comrades. I can't ask them to accept her unconditionally."

David didn't say it, but those dead Red Shield members had been his comrades, too.

Kai threw up his hands. It was a few moments before he was able to respond. "But you can see that she isn't hostile."

"*She* isn't. But what about the other Schiff? If they haven't given up their goal of killing Saya, we need to prepare to face them. We need to collect whatever information we can about the Schiff—"

"—and think about where to fight." The loyal, round-faced Louis finished David's sentence.

"We can guarantee her safety and concentrate on treating the Thorn," David continued. "In exchange for this, we will gather

information on her physiology . . . Those are the minimum requirements Collins suggested."

Aurélien was a valuable source of information.

Red Shield was conducting research on Chiropterans. By learning more about their biology they could determine their weaknesses and ultimately destroy them. Collins and Julia would probably welcome Aurélien, in the same way that they would welcome a docile lab animal full of useful data.

Collins called Saya a "weapon," and looked upon her coldly as the descendant of monsters. Kai couldn't imagine sending Aurélien into his hands would result in any happiness for her.

"Kai, I will be all right." Kai, presently glaring at David, was reassured by Aurélien herself. "Professor Collins and Julia are on your side, right, Kai? Then it will be OK."

"Aurélien . . ." As if his heart were tired, Kai lowered his chin and wasn't able to speak further.

The smiling Aurélien lifted her head off her pillow and looked up at Saya. "Saya . . . can I call you that?"

Saya's pulse raced. This enemy she had been prepared to kill not more than a few minutes earlier was now looking at her not with animosity, but with a big smile.

It wasn't that long ago that the girl had hidden herself behind Kai's back, staring at Saya in terror. Also, she had killed a member of their group.

"I-I . . ." Saya's voice trembled. Her eyes wandered the carpet, and when she timidly looked again to the surface of the bed, Aurélien sat there patiently, waiting for her response.

Saya noticed something as she looked at the Schiff's eyes.

Aurélien was still afraid. Diva's older sister, Saya, frightened her. Yet, she had suppressed the fear and hostility from her features and forced a smile.

She had done it because Kai trusted her.

And now, she was trying to trust Kai's younger sister, Saya.

". . . Yeah." Saya finally nodded her head. She could finally forget the katana in her hand.

Aurélien's eyes brightened.

"Thank you, Saya. I am Aurélien."

It was probably because she hadn't had much contact with society that even subtlest emotions came across very vividly, and Saya could tell she wasn't lying.

"Saya . . . I hope you can help us." Aurélien extended her hand toward Saya. "The only ones that can fix our problem are you and Diva."

She wasn't wearing gloves now. Red cracks ran across the cream-colored skin of the hand that crept out from her sleeve.

Saya took that hand into her palm and stepped closer to her bed as Aurélien lost consciousness.

Her hand was warm. Just like a person's.

Kai turned to Saya, and spoke with renewed urgency.

"Saya, I am begging you. Give Aurélien your blood."

"Blood . . . ?"

"I don't get it all either, but with your blood, the Schiff can get rid of the Thorn. They believe this guy named Boris who told them that, and that's why they have targeted you. But all they need is blood, so there is no reason to have you dead. The Schiff didn't think of that because they didn't know they could trust

other people. I don't think there were any decent people at that Kilbed place."

Putting his thoughts in order, Kai took a breath. "So I want you, Saya, to teach them."

"Me?"

"Yeah. You can teach them there are people they can trust and count on to give them answers. I want you to teach the Schiff that."

". . ." Saya's eyes trembled with indecision.

It wasn't because she was wary of the Schiff. Rather, she was concerned about her own body.

The presence of Diva murmured at her ear.

—Neesama's blood is poison to me. My blood is poison to Neesama.

If Diva's Chevaliers or servant Chiropteran, came in contact with Saya's blood, they would immediately crystallize and die. And the opposite was also true. If Saya or Hagi were to come into contact with Diva's blood, they would also die. But the Schiff were a mystery.

For them, which blood acted like Medusa's gaze? Was neither harmful to them? Or were both . . .

A chill shook Saya's shoulders.

She remembered how George had died. She never wanted to see a scene like that again.

Saya suddenly felt pressure on her right hand. Aurélien's grip was both encouraging and desperate.

"Please, Saya." The eyes that looked up to her were clear like deep but transparent lakes.

"But . . . do you have any positive proof that my blood can fix your condition . . . ?"

"I want to believe it does. I hope . . . you and Kai can . . ."

Either way, left like this, her hours were numbered. Aurélien understood that better than anyone.

Saya softly squeezed Aurélien's hand back.

"I understand now. I will give you my blood."

"Saya!" The shout of joy came not from Aurélien, but from Kai.

It felt like it had been a long time since she had seen him that happy. But she needed to make sure they understood.

"Wait. It is possible that Julia-san will find a more reliable cure? I think we'll have time to test my blood after we get to headquarters."

"Hmm . . . does that sound OK with you, Aurélien?" asked Kai.

"Yes. I think everyone will understand."

As Aurélien answered, Kai knit his brow and scratched his head with his right hand. "Oh, yeah. We also need to persuade the others in your group, huh? What a pain . . . that one with the glasses seemed really stubborn."

"Carmen." Aurélien seemed oddly pleased to say his name. "He's my older brother. He kind of reminds me of you, Kai."

"Me? You're joking, right?" Kai frowned dramatically, making Aurélien giggle.

"You even get mad the same way he does."

The angry Kai had no way to respond.

Saya couldn't stifle her laughter, and she gave Kai a hard pat on the back. "I'll leave the Schiff-convincing to you, Kai-niichan."

"He-hey!"

As he struggled to respond, Saya turned around and headed toward the entrance.

She wanted some fresh air.

"I'm sorry. I decided without discussing it."

Saya apologized in a low whisper to David, who was standing next to the door.

David had made no deals with Aurélien regarding Saya's blood.

As he stared stoically at Kai and the Schiff girl making friendly chatter, David responded by asking one question.

". . . Are you serious about persuading the other Schiff?"

"Yes."

With that short answer, she exited to the hallway.

Even though they had reached a compromise with Aurélien, Saya didn't think that reaching an agreement with the Schiff would be as simple. She had fought them before. She knew what murderers they were.

For now, she just wanted to let Kai and Aurélien enjoy each other's company for as long as she could.

It was a Parisian library, so she had expected a more formal and fancy atmosphere, but in reality it just felt old and tedious.

On top of that, the silence made her sleepy.

Mao Jahana sat with her upper torso resting on the surface of a table, raising the eyebrows of a few of the French people who passed by her searching for books. If it hadn't been for the upbeat music coming through the earphones of her MP3 player, she surely would have been sound asleep.

Even from France, she was able to download with a computer and credit card the newest album from an Okinawan mellow-core

band she had been looking forward to hearing. It was a good time to be alive.

"French music is all nasally *chanson* stuff," she complained.

"You're wrong, and you better not say that out loud in French." The middle-aged Akihiro Okamura (though he claimed to be in his twenties, and for some reason Mao believed him) didn't look up from the pile of books he was flipping through as he replied.

She had helped this mess of a photojournalist come all the way from Okinawa to Europe so they could find Kai, but all he had been doing was looking for D67 and poking around the burnt-up mansion of a rich guy named Goldschmidt in Bordeaux.

The Chateau Duel wine Okamura had discovered at the nature conservatory in Okinawa and at the Lycée du Cinq Flèche in Vietnam was only connected to the name Goldschmidt by a very thin thread.

"Oh! Kai, what are you doing right now?" Mao wondered.

"C'mon, he's with that girl, Saya Otonash—" Okamura's response was cut short by a thick, leather-bound book being slammed into the side of his face. He was thrown from his chair, knocking his high stack of books onto the floor.

Mao picked up the earphones that had fallen from her ears, and threatened him with her eyes the same way her father would have. "Don't even think that. Kai and Otonashi are brother and sister!"

"Yeah, but not by blood, right?" As other visitors looked at him with disgust, and the female librarian cleared her throat as a warning, Okamura sat up and waved his hand to dispel any nonexistent concern for his health. He looked like a typical

Asian embarrassed in front of strangers as he quickly stacked the books back on the tabletop, and Mao leaned close to give him a sour stare.

"If you have enough free time to make idiotic jokes then you have enough time to find just one clue to get us out of here. You said we could find Kai in Paris, but we have spent the last three days in this damn library."

"I have been working hard investigating."

"A sponsor doesn't want excuses. She wants results." Mao tossed her long, chestnut-colored hair behind her shoulder and gave Okamura a long, cold look. The ten years he had on her meant nothing compared to the fifty million yen she had on him.

"Results . . . yes." Okamura grimaced and his right hand instinctually reached into the breast pocket of his vest for a cigarette as he brought himself back up to the table, although he couldn't have been so naive to think he could give in to his nicotine addiction in the library.

"I think that discovering that the Goldschmidt family of our Chateau Duel is related to the financially powerful Goldsmith group is a pretty substantial result."

"Goldsmith . . . you mean of Cinq Flèche?"

"Right. Solomon Goldsmith is one of them."

Okamura tapped his finger on an impressively bound guide to Cinq Flèche Pharmaceuticals business practices. It was open to the page introducing the chief executive officer and had a picture of a beautiful young man all the girls of the world would swoon over.

"The ruins of the mansion . . . in this old document they call it the Zoo. It seems it was built in 1830. At that time, the Goldsmiths

were one branch of the Goldschmidt family, and they kept the name because of genealogy."

After that Okamura read from the memos he had been taking.

"But after the fire at the Zoo and the death of Joel Goldschmidt, the head of the Goldschmidt family, the Goldschmidt name disappears from history. The Goldsmiths, who shouldn't have been more than a branch, then took over. They began selling stocks in their company and gained defense contracts during World War II, and now the Cinq Flèche Group is a conglomeration of hundreds of separate businesses with branches all over the world."

"Hnn?" Mao's response couldn't have sounded less interested as she gazed out the window.

It was already nighttime in Paris. It must have been close to eight o'clock, when the library would close.

Okamura continued, "Cinq Flèche is connected to Goldsmith. The Zoo where the wine came from belonged to the Goldschmidts. These two are connected, and I have a feeling there's more to it than simple family finances. If we could investigate the line from Goldsmith to Goldschmidt . . ."

Mao broke in, "All you talk about are predictions and assumptions. What is clear is the relationship between Goldsmith and Cinq Flèche, and the relationship between Goldschmidt and Goldsmith, that's all. We still haven't made any real progress."

"Well, up to now."

As if the real crucial work was going to begin from here, Okamura let out a faint smile.

"Goldschmidt was a man of unimaginable wealth, at the top of the economic heap when he retired. Even after a hundred years,

his name carries a great deal of clout in a variety of circles. Of course, being from a distinguished family earns you a certain amount of respect, but don't you think that there's more to Goldschmidt's power than that?"

"You mean there's a certain reason?"

"Yes. One reason is the same as the source of your father's influence."

"Huh?!"

Mao had been swinging her earphone cord with her right hand when her eyebrows wrinkled up.

Within Koza city, the Jahana family was well known for being well off. On top of that, her father's line of business was officially real estate, but it was common knowledge that he was also Yakuza.

"I tracked down the plots of land that Goldschmidt held under different names. France, Italy, Spain, Germany, Australia, England, Wales, Scotland, Belgium, Poland, Hungary, Sweden . . . in other words, all across the Christian world. The value of all that land in developed nations is enough to make you laugh."

Okamura pulled out a city map of Paris and spread it open. Many locations had been circled with a yellow highlighter, covering no small portion of the city.

"You know this place. It's the boutique for the most popular brand in Japan. Goldschmidt leases out this land."

"Wow! They don't even own it."

"So here is the real discovery . . ." Okamura's finger traveled from the Champs Élysées through the urban center of Paris to an

old-town area. "This apartment is owned under the Goldschmidt name, but for years rejected any new tenants. That is, until about a week ago, when some new people were suddenly allowed to move in."

"What makes you think it was Kai and the rest of his group?"

"What if I told you that among those new tenants were an Asian boy and an Asian girl about your age?"

Mao's right hand stopped moving, and her earphones swung into her wrist. She couldn't be certain, but it was hard to imagine it could have been anybody else. It just might be worth taking a walk.

European autumns weren't that much different from European winters.

Once the sun went down, thick jackets were a must. But Riku didn't mind the chilly air. The humid cold felt good on his chest.

"I wonder if Saya-neechan is OK . . ." Riku worried out loud as he peered down into the central garden.

Saya walked out of the back entrance alone and appeared to be deep in thought as she slowly walked between the shrubs. Riku sat with his back against a bay window on the roof. From the way her back was hunched, Riku suspected that she was freezing.

She was probably reacting to her quarrel with Kai. On top of that, she was no doubt worried about dealing with Aurélien and the Schiff.

Riku turned to his companion. "Say, Hagi. What should I do in these kinds of situations?"

"Simply watch over her." The young man in black sitting on the roof with his shoes resting on the edge appeared to be a close friend of the cold and of the darkness of night.

Aware of the temperature, Hagi prepared his cello as he peered down from the roof at his master. He wasn't trying to convey his feelings, but simply show her care and kindness.

"... You are amazing, Hagi." Riku truly felt that from his heart. He did things in a way only Hagi could do, and never failed to support Saya.

"Even though I became a Chevalier, I am not as strong as you, Hagi ... There is not much I can do to help Saya-neechan ..."

According to Julia's diagnosis, besides the ability to quickly regenerate, there hadn't been much change in Riku's abilities. The powers required to protect one's queen—physical strength, lightning-fast reflexes and accelerated brain functions—didn't seem to have manifested on a measurable level.

Riku felt vexed.

If he had Hagi's strength, then he could be a real help to Saya.

Hagi turned to him. "There is something that only Riku can do."

Hagi ran the bow in his bandaged right hand across the strings. A deep moan pierced the night air, and the view of Paris seemed very distant.

"But ..."

Hagi stopped playing. "You can always be by Saya's side. That's something that only Riku can do."

It was difficult to doubt Hagi's words. Being by her side—Riku wondered how much that alone would really be helpful to Saya. Hagi could do that better himself, couldn't he?

"It's not only me, but you, too, Hagi. I mean, it's our duty to keep Saya-neechan safe, right?

"My work is—"

Hagi stopped in midsentence and returned his cello to its case. He moved so slowly and meticulously that Riku felt like he could hear the chains strapped to Hagi's arms and legs.

Hagi didn't look down into the central garden, but out toward the city.

"Riku, get inside."

"Wha-?"

Hagi's body was as finely tuned as an instrument.

Suddenly, Riku became aware of a group of presences. They were ignoring the crowded roads and buildings full of people, on a path straight for the apartment building.

"They are . . ."

There was no mistake. Schiff.

Turning his face into the sudden burst of wind, Riku saw that Hagi was no longer there.

Hagi leapt silently down from the roof, looking like he had floated on big black wings. His feet didn't make a sound when they hit the ground.

Saya sensed his presence behind her before she could call to him.

She could also smell several Chiropterans quickly closing on their location at a high rate of speed.

"Saya."

"Yeah . . . they must've followed Aurélien's scent."

"They are coming to fight."

"I know," Saya answered quietly as she faced the direction from which they would come.

She wanted to take Kai's and Aurélien's feelings to heart. However, whether or not the other Schiff would listen . . . they shouldn't need to cross swords.

"Hey. What's wrong?"

Saya turned toward Kai's voice just in time to see him shutting the rear gate.

She didn't think he had come out to the garden because he sensed the problem. And of course, he was used to seeing Saya and Hagi acting strange.

"Where's Aurélien?" Saya asked.

"She's still asleep in bed. I don't know what kind of disease Thom is, but I am not so sure it's good for her to sleep that much."

His facial expressions weren't as pessimistic as his words. Saya had already promised to share her blood; so, perhaps his concern for Aurélien's condition was less immediate.

"But what are you guys doing? Louis said food is ready and we should hurry up and eat."

". . . The Schiff are coming."

Kai's face went pale. Having won his fight for Aurélien, he probably hadn't thought about how he was going to convince the other Schiff. "I will try and talk to them."

"—Kai!" The voice that called out to warn Kai belonged to a young girl.

Kai and Saya turned in unison toward the source of the call.

Standing in the arch leading to the street was a tall Asian girl. She looked petrified.

She was well primped and beautiful, but it was clear from looking into her eyes this was no simple daughter of a rich family. Saya and Kai recognized her immediately.

"Jahana-san . . . ?"

"Mao . . . what the hell . . . ?"

Neither of them was able to form a complete question.

Even ignoring how far France was from Okinawa, having Mao unexpectedly barge into a Red Shield–owned apartment building was bizarre enough on its own. There was no way it was just a coincidence.

"What in the world are you guys doing here?" she demanded.

"I should be asking you! How the hell did you get here?!" asked Kai.

"Naturally, I was searching for you!" Mao's words were enough to cause Kai to take a step backward.

She gave Kai a viscous glare and then grabbed him by the collar and pulled his face to her chest. ". . . I was so worried."

"Mao." Kai hesitated a moment before grabbing Mao's shoulders, but it wasn't to return the hug. Kai carefully pushed her away, but his words were not as gentle.

"Go home."

"We can't do that. To get here, we went from Okinawa to Vietnam, and then on top of that followed you to France." The response

came from the mouth of a cynical-looking man. He was probably in his midthirties. His hair was messy, and he hadn't shaved recently. His clothes were wrinkled, but there was a spark of will in his eyes.

Those eyes spotted Saya and stuck, looking her over head to toe. "So you're Saya Otonashi? I finally get to meet you. I've been looking for you."

"—!"

Saya bit her lower lip lightly and gripped the handle of her katana with her right hand.

She quickly crouched low. From the scabbard came a red gleam. The Chiropteran crystal embedded in the blade of her sword—a piece of George's body. Saya's eyes burned the same crimson color.

The man's body stiffened.

"Hey . . ."

She could kill him.

That might have been what he was thinking. That was how bloodthirsty she looked.

Yet, Saya had absolutely no intention of killing him. She was reacting to something else.

From the top of the apartment building towering behind the man danced a shadow that looked like a large black owl.

What came down from above toward Saya was a young man in a uniform.

"Carmen, stop it!" Kai's plea came after Saya leapt into the air.

The next moment, Saya growled as her sword swung forward for Carmen's chest. "Graa!"

Thanks to his three-pronged pike, Carmen deflected Saya's strike, but not before the tip of her blade had torn into his cheek.

As a blue spark flashed and a metallic clang rang through the air, the two kicked off the ivy-draped walls of the apartment building and landed on the ground.

Carmen rubbed the cut on his cheek with his thumb and then clenched his teeth. One by one more shadows dropped from the sky.

"You ran off ahead of us again."

Half joking and half shocked, it was the purple-haired girl, Lulu, who spoke up first.

Next to her stood the stocky, completely shorn Dars, followed by the tall and delicate-looking Gudrif, almost completing the group of Schiff.

"Where is Aurélien?!" Carmen demanded.

"Just relax." The one who attempted to soothe his angry brother wielded a giant medieval-looking scythe. His name was Moses, and he appeared to be their leader.

"If Aurélien is here, then it is safe to assume she has been captured by the humans. If she tried to recklessly attack them all on her own, it wouldn't be strange to think that she could be injured."

"It's better than just dying without doing anything!" Carmen's bloodlust shut Moses up. The others seemed to understand the intensity of his love for Aurélien.

With the tip of her katana pointed at the Schiff, Saya directed Kai and Mao to her rear in order to protect them. She stared into the pain-filled eyes of the bespectacled Schiff.

Mao looked at the Schiff from over Kai's shoulder as she clung tightly to his sleeve.

"Wha-what are these people . . ."

"This is why I told you to go home."

Mao froze when she saw Kai pull the pistol from the small of his back.

He cocked the weapon and took a step forward as he raised his voice. "Aurélien is safe. I would like to speak with you."

"Shut the hell up!" Carmen quickly dismissed Kai's offer before hearing him out.

"He's pretty upset. What should we do, Moses?"

"It's out of my hands. Either way, we need to get Saya's blood." Moses responded bitterly to Lulu's hopeless tone, then volunteered, "I'll cover the Chevalier." Moses held his sickle-shaped blade horizontally and his body soared in what seemed like a sudden squall. Hagi had already drawn close to him and followed him into the air. In a moment the Chevalier was above Moses, and his right hand flicked like a whip.

Somehow Moses was able to block the dagger that Hagi had tossed at almost point-blank range.

"The real objective is Saya." It seemed that this was truly Moses's belief. Without looking at the fight taking place above, Lulu readied her battle-ax. It looked big enough to slice through a water buffalo in a single swing.

As Okamura watched the fight, his Adam's apple rose and then fell back into place.

"What in the world is going on here?"

"How the hell should I know?!"

His question rebuffed, the confused man held the camera strapped around his neck up in his hands, but that seemed more like an unconscious reflex.

Saya noticed that the lens of the camera was facing toward the photographer, but she didn't have time to concern herself. She was already too busy with Carmen.

"Outta my way!" Under other circumstances, Saya would have been a natural target for Carmen, but at that moment she was nothing but an obstacle to him. He could think of nothing but Aurélien, who was inside the building. And if he believed that he was helping Aurélien, there was no doubt he would kill Kai.

—Just as Saya expected.

Saya got low to attack, and honed the tension building inside her before the attack as she confirmed in her head she was doing the right thing.

Carmen thrust with his long pike, the three blades drawing near. Saya moved to the side and stepped forward.

Just as Saya expected, the Schiff were the enemy.

There was no way they were going to follow Kai's line of thinking.

Saya aimed through Carmen's long robe for his throat. He quickly spun the butt end of his long spear around to defend himself.

However, his wide gesture exposed his body to Saya.

She turned sideways and drove her elbow like a stake into Carmen's abdomen.

"... Oof!"

Saya unleashed a barrage of kicks on Carmen until he fell to the ground in anguish. She then quietly leapt backward, just in

time to see a large battle-ax and maul smash into the ground where she had stood one beat before.

Lulu and Dars had swung their weapons at the same time from either side of her, and both of their mouths curled in frustration.

No. They were smiling.

Before Saya knew what had hit her, her body was tossed sideways.

She felt a sharp blade barely catch her back as she did a one-handed cartwheel. She landed on her knees with her katana at the ready.

Gudrif spun back like a shadow and gave a single swing of his sword before Saya saw his eyebrows come together like an upside-down V above his giant sunglasses.

"Her moves have improved since last time." He was trying to say that his long sword should have sliced through her spine.

"Don't make excuses."

Lulu responded to Gudrif's comment snidely before suddenly moving quickly.

Her speed rivaled that of a Chevalier.

But Saya could see her.

The change of the air density from the wind pressure caused the background scenery to appear warped as the battle-ax came closer. Lulu changed her course unsteadily, and Saya briefly thought she had taken off into the air, but instead she bounced off one wall to come down onto Saya from above.

At the precise moment of the attack, Saya slid forward under Lulu and caught the handle of the massive battle-ax in her left hand. At the same time she swung the katana in her right.

"—Wha?"

Dumbfounded, Lulu stared at Saya, who appeared unexpectedly. The blade that should have sunk deep into her chest had been intercepted by the tip of the three-pronged pike.

Sparks flew from the clashing blades, and Saya took a step back to get out of the way without looking at Carmen.

Dars's blunt weapon looked like a wrecking ball falling from the sky, but it only succeeded in opening up a giant crater in the ground.

A cloud of smoke blocked her view of the enemy, as a series of gunshots rang out from the apartment building's second floor.

Gudrif's sword veered awkwardly as it deflected a bullet. Yet, David continued to aim accurately and fire quickly.

After four bullets had landed in Gudrif's upper body, the final shot pulverized the Schiff's kneecap.

"Shit."

Gudrif's battered body collapsed onto the ground. As an immortal Chiropteran, the agony he was feeling was only temporary, and the worst that could happen was that he would be debilitated for a bit.

As she thanked the reloading David, Saya took off running.

Carmen and Dars stood over the fallen Gudrif in order to protect him. It was clear they weren't going to make this easy.

There was a strong bond among the members of the Schiff. Like humans, they were prepared to sacrifice themselves to protect their brothers.

But . . . they were the enemy.

"Hyaaaa!" Her unnecessary thoughts were shattered by her own impassioned cry, and Saya went on the attack.

"Saya! Stop!"

Kai's words wrapped themselves around Saya's body, and suddenly her sword felt heavy.

Still, Saya continued forward with her blade aimed at Dars. With a boom, his large maul swung down, carrying both weapons toward the ground.

Saya slipped back just before the maul hit the stone-covered ground and just in time to deflect Carmen's pike while she ducked to dodge a swing from Lulu's ax. Staying low to the ground, Saya slipped through the gap between Carmen and Lulu to make a stab at Dars. She stepped on the head of his weapon as he lifted it from the ground and jumped.

"Gwaa . . . !"

She sent her kneecap straight into the bridge of Dars's nose and continued over his head with her sights set on the immobilized Gudrif.

"Stop it!"

"Aurélien!"

Aurélien's plea from the apartment window was overlapped by Kai's voice, causing Saya to hesitate for a moment.

A fraction of a fraction of a second. To a Schiff, that wasn't such a short period of time.

"Oh . . ."

The moment after she felt a great pressure being applied to her right ankle, Saya went moving through the air.

Carmen had grabbed Saya's ankle with his right hand and pulled her back by force. He expected to slam her head into the hard ground and smash in her skull, but that's not what happened.

Saya shrunk her body inward and wrapped her left leg around Carmen's neck.

"Grck . . ." With the grip around his neck tightening, Carmen fell to the ground along with Saya.

Despite the powerful impact of the fall, Saya didn't release Carmen's throat. As they rolled across the ground, she skillfully shifted her body above and switched her sword to an underhand grip, pointing its tip just above his chest.

Just as she was about to press the blade into his flesh, she was interrupted once again.

"Why you . . ."

Saya took the brunt of Lulu's jeer and the horizontal swing of her battle-ax with her sword's blade. In that moment her upper body was thrown back from the collision, the wind knocked out of her from the pain of what felt like a mace landing on her back. It was Carmen, kneeing her in the spine.

"Unhh . . . !"

Saya did a somersault away and jumped to her feet.

But already Lulu, Dars, and Gudrif had rushed her.

—It was too late!

There was no timing that could avoid all three attacks injury free. The moment Saya resolved her position and prepared her body for the blows it would receive, the three assailants unexpectedly scattered.

Their attack had been interrupted by a black mass that fell down from the sky.

It was Gudrif who recognized the robed boy who had fallen.

"Moses!"

Dars looked up and saw the figure of Moses's rival, Hagi, flying about above the roof. He swooped down from behind Saya and hoisted her up.

The bandage on his right hand had been swept away in the wind, and his Chiropteran forearm gleamed a metallic shine for all to see.

". . . He's a tough one." Moses lifted himself up, using his sickle as support, as he glared at Hagi.

Hagi restrained the four Schiff as Saya stood up to confront one more enemy.

"Saya!"

Before Kai could lift his pistol and warn her, Saya had already adroitly avoided the attack.

Saya saw the wind-carried robes of Carmen coming her way. His eyes were bloodshot.

Saya had positioned herself with her katana swung to her rear when another figure flew in from her side.

"No!"

Carmen pulled back his pike diagonally, and his face reflected his surprise.

It seemed like time slowed in hesitation.

The shining tip of his spear had touched her white throat, but the force had been deflected, and no blood had been drawn.

Aurélien had put out both arms to protect Saya and she gazed intensely at her brother.

"No, Carmen."

"Aurélien!"

The intense bloodlust that had been in his face a few seconds earlier was gone. He looked upon his little sister with peaceful relief, and Saya seemed to no longer exist in his world.

"Are you OK? The humans didn't do anything to you, did they?"

"I am fine. It's all thanks to Kai. He was the one who helped me."

"Helped . . . ?"

Carmen examined Aurélien's expression closely before looking Kai over suspiciously. He was thinking.

Kai gave him the same threatening look back. Carmen's only response was a frustrated smack of his tongue, as if to say that what was important now wasn't a belligerent human, but Aurélien's well-being.

"Why did you go running around this human city on your own? Even on cloudy days, the ultraviolet rays can—"

He had worried about his sister. He placed his hand lightly on her shoulders, and then Carmen's face stiffened once again.

He saw it on her cheek. The ominous red cracks.

"When did . . . why didn't you say anything?"

"Even if I did, it wouldn't change anything. Like with Ghee . . ." As she spoke, Aurélien's body swayed, as if blown by the wind.

"Aurélien!"

Carmen supported her and Kai rushed near.

"Aurélien, stay strong!"

Carmen didn't refuse Kai's supporting hand as the human called out to her. Kai hardly noticed.

"I have no idea what's going on." The man who had arrived with Mao pointed his camera at Aurélien as he grumbled to himself.

Mao stopped him with her hand. ". . . I get it."

Without a word the man distorted his face and lowered his camera.

Mao didn't know the Schiff. So, in theory, she shouldn't know about Chiropterans, either. But she had seen them in the flesh, and so under the circumstances she chose the path of being a silent spectator. Restraint wasn't Mao's style; this was out of sympathy for the hurting Aurélien.

Carmen knelt on the ground and held his arms out, supporting Aurélien. After a few moments, he opened his eyes.

He was surrounded by Hagi and all the Schiff, who had ended the battle.

Hagi stood with his cello case resting on the ground in front of him, and Saya lowered her sword.

"Aurélien, in your condition . . . it's insanity." Aurélien smiled at Lulu, who was on the verge of tears.

"I was scared. I thought I would die where I didn't know anything or anybody."

"We're here now!" Aurélien quickly turned at the sound of Carmen's charged and angry voice.

Saya felt like she could understand Aurélien's feelings.

The Schiff only had each other. They only had their siblings, all with the Thorn, all carrying the same fate. With your brothers and sisters, you are born, you fight, you kill, and you live. Anyone outside of that circle is nonexistent. Aurélien would never be able to change that.

"Stay strong, Aurélien!" Moses's cool features didn't match the emotion in his voice.

"Aurélien! Don't die, Aurélien!" Dars and Gudrif shouted out to her.

As Kai held Aurélien's hand, he lifted his head with courage.

"Saya, give Aurélien your blood!"

The Schiff stared at Kai, speechless.

With the weight of all the silent gazes upon him, Kai continued. "Please! There isn't any time!"

"But . . ." Saya understood that Aurélien's condition had progressed to a more advanced state than they had expected. Even if they were to leave right then for Red Shield headquarters, they wouldn't make it in time to treat her. Saya knew that if she was going to give her blood, it had better be now. And yet, Saya hesitated in making a decision. She didn't believe her blood would make any difference.

"Saya's blood will help Aurélien. That's right, isn't it?"

Moses bit his lip before giving Kai an answer, and Carmen picked up the long pike lying at his feet.

"Hmph."

Moses laid a hand on Carmen's shoulder, preventing him from aiming.

Once he knew the frustrated Carmen was under control, Moses turned to Saya again.

"At a time like this do you say, 'please'?"

"Eh?"

"To get something we want, we know only to take it. If there is another way, I want you to tell us." Moses looked sincere in his request, but above that, he looked tired.

Carmen, Gudrif, Dars, Lulu—standing there in their dirty robes, they looked upon Aurélien with mixed feelings of hope

and despair revealed in their eyes. Saya realized that each and every member of the Schiff looked exhausted. Even if during the time since they had escaped Kilbed they had been able to rest their bodies, their minds had never stopped feeling ill at ease.

"Saya-neechan . . ." Riku walked down the stairs from the entrance and stood beside her.

Saya knew what Riku was trying to say to her.

When he saw Hagi lined up in front with the Schiff, Riku turned and looked up to his sister in silence.

David and Louis, who had walked out of the building with Riku, also remained silent. They both carried guns, but didn't aim them at the Schiff.

Saya turned back again to Aurélien. The Thorn had spread significantly across her cheeks. Her skin was looking hard, like stone, and its natural color had faded.

And yet, her eyes remained calm.

"Saya . . ."

After calling Saya's name ever so quietly, Aurélien's lips moved. Her voice was barely audible, but Saya could read her lips.

I believe in you.

Saya broke the silence and opened her mouth. ". . . I know you do. I will give you my blood."

The collective expression of the Schiff sparkled. It was as if the rays of the sun illuminated their faces.

"Did you hear that, Aurélien?! She's going to help you!"

As Carmen carried Aurélien, seemingly to keep her from Kai, Aurélien gave Kai a smile. Particles from her cheeks and lips fell to her uniform like powder.

There was little time. Saya quickly kneeled down next to her and ran the sharp point of her sword across the palm of her left hand. Her flesh split open with a sharp pain and red liquid ran down her wrist.

She brought her bloody hand closer to Aurélien's face.

Nobody said a word. Not the Schiff, the humans, or the Chevaliers.

Carmen carefully raised Aurélien's torso up in his strong arms.

Saya couldn't help but ask one more time.

"Are you sure about this?"

Aurélien quietly nodded.

"Even if you drink my blood, it's possible nothing will change."

"Even still . . . I . . ."

It was a chance they were going to take.

Aurélien had said she believed in hope.

When people are about to die, the last thing they can hold on to is hope. It was a fleeting desire, but more sublime than nihilistic despair.

Saya wanted more than anything to believe in the future Aurélien's eyes saw before her.

Saya made a wish on the hot pain she held in her hand. Then she held her hand close to Aurélien's mouth and allowed the blood pooled in her palm to touch Aurélien's lips.

A red ripple ran across the serene surface of her face.

Aurélien's throat moved, and a red line spilled from her lips and ran down her chin to her neck.

Neither Carmen nor Moses, Kai nor Riku, made a single sound. All they wanted to do was watch over the girl.

Aurélien's eyelids shut, and it appeared that any remaining strength had been tapped out of her.

The softness of her expression returned at the same time that the network of fissures in her face and neck stopped expanding. The result was very obvious, even to an outsider.

Her respiration calmed to a normal pace.

The hope to beat the curse of the Thorn had been realized.

"Aurélien . . ."

As Carmen stroked his sister's cheek, he looked like nothing more than a caring older brother.

And it wasn't only him. Moses, Gudrif, Lulu, Dars—they were all smiling.

It was more than happiness for their sister's recovery. They lit up with hope.

Right then, a groan rose from Aurélien's throat.

Her arms and legs went into convulsions, and her spine bent backward like a bow.

Saya watched. She watched the color of white death ooze from the Thorn cracks in Aurélien's skin as her blood crystallized, her tissues expanded, and her organs broke apart—a Chiropteran's death.

". . . Why . . . ?"

Why shouldn't she live?

That was Aurélien's lament as her right hand reached for the night sky.

Hope crumbled into dust.

Aurélien had already turned to the color of ruby and her right arm broke off at the shoulder and fell to the ground in pieces. Her other limbs began to collapse inside her clothes, and her neck snapped.

Saya saw a single tear fall from those eyes staring straight at death.

She was able to catch Aurélien's falling head in her outstretched hands. But she, too, was in a state of shock, and Aurélien's head soon fell from her fingers between her knees and was pulverized on the stone-covered ground. The pieces of red crystal shone in the moonlight that illuminated the central garden.

"—Uwaaaa!"

It was a shout cursing the heavens.

Carmen's cry swelled through the sky, and without his pike in his hand, he reached out to grab Saya.

"You tricked us! You gave her fake blood!"

Saya was unable to look him in the face. She couldn't take her eyes off Aurélien's corpse spread in tiny pieces across the ground.

What stopped Carmen's arm was the black-sleeved arm of Saya's Chevalier.

"No one tried to trick you."

Carmen was angered by Hagi's flat affect and glared at him earnestly.

"So, then why . . . why?!"

Surprised, Saya looked at him.

Why?

The question from the Schiff pierced her body. They had believed in her . . . why couldn't her blood save them?

She knew it wasn't her responsibility, but she couldn't give a clear explanation as to why it had happened.

And she couldn't get away from the fact that it was she who had killed Aurélien.

"Was this an experiment? Were we born to die?"

Saya wondered whom Carmen's bitter words were directed at.

The researchers at Kilbed? Diva? Or maybe at all of humanity? Fate might also fit well on that list. But Carmen was staring straight at Saya.

With his right arm wrapped up in Hagi's, Carmen extended his left hand.

His sleeve was torn to pieces and his arm had transformed to its Chiropteran form. The flesh between his middle and ring fingers was torn open, and a sharp, red spike struggled to rise through.

The next moment Saya heard what sounded like a bow snapping as it sent an arrow flying.

The crimson stake shot from his flesh at point-blank range.

The blood dripping on the ground stained Aurélien's robes.

". . . Stop it, Carmen." Suddenly Moses stood in front of Saya and his order came from a mouth stiffened with anguish. From his shoulder stuck out the long pointed barb that had been ejected from Carmen's hand.

"We have our limits. We have been given a limited lifespan . . . this is finally clear to me." What Moses had suspected had been confirmed. He intimated that he understood their fate, but he wasn't giving up the fight.

"We Schiff were created from Diva's blood. So, probably the only thing that can save us is her blood."

The other Schiff listened to his words in silence.

Moses knelt down and picked up a crystallized piece of Aurélien's body.

One by one, Lulu, Gudrif, and Dars each picked up and held a piece of their sister's body in their hands.

"But we don't need any more help. To free ourselves from these reins we must kill Diva." Moses gripped the crystal in his fist so tightly that blood oozed out from under his glove.

One hope had been lost, but it appeared they had decided on a new plan.

"We're leaving."

Moses stood up, and the other Schiff proceeded to turn their backs, following him.

". . . Leaving? Where are you going?" Kai's question stopped the Schiff in their tracks.

They had no place to go. They had no place to call home.

"I mean, together . . . you could fight Diva with us. If we were to work together, it would be something."

"We never learned how to do something like that." Moses turned down Kai's proposal, but looked over his shoulder at him with calm and gentle eyes.

Saya could feel those eyes looking at her, too, but she wasn't able to look back at him directly.

"I want to be able to say 'thank you.' I haven't had a chance to use these words, yet."

As she listened to Moses's words, Saya's vision was distorted by tears. She wouldn't have been able to join forces with someone

she felt this much hostility toward, either. Only Kai and Aurélien had been brave enough to cross that line.

The Schiff disappeared.

Carmen pulled his arm from Hagi's grasp and drew close to Kai, plucking a crystal from his sister's body from Kai's hand.

Carmen's eyes, the same color as Aurélien's, traded glances with Kai before he hurried after the others without saying another word.

02

WHENEVER HE WAS there, Van constantly felt like his body was sinking slowly into a bog.

Until the Middle Ages, England had been no more than a simple island country in Europe. At one time the British Empire had covered a significant portion of the planet, and a worthy rival to France under the great Napoleon Bonaparte.

Of course, this had been a couple of centuries ago. Now, England was considered a developed country, one of many minor powers in the world.

The reception room in which Van stood was furnished in antiques reminiscent of the era of Britain's supremacy. The air held a century's worth of tension.

Of course, back in Van's home country of France, many residences maintained traditional architecture and styles. But none had homeowners like this one.

He was always protected by an armor of time.

After the morning butler had led Van from the front door to this room, how much time had passed?

Finally, the door to the rear of the room opened without a sound, and Van stood up from the sofa where he sat.

"I've kept you waiting, Van Argeno." The beautiful and bottomless deep voice weighed on Van's shoulders.

"It has been a long time, Sir Anshel."

Van put his hand to his breast pocket. He gave a slow bow and rose up as if his body were stuck in thick mud while his mouth formed a smile. It wouldn't be right to greet the head of Goldsmith Holdings, the chief stockholder of Cinq Flèche Pharmaceuticals, with a sour look.

Van was at Cinq Flèche now, but originally he had worked at Goldsmith Holdings, so in a way, he was in the presence of his employer.

And yet, he hesitated to waste time with unnecessary diplomacy. In order to arrange a few minutes of this man's time, Van had wasted exponentially many more hours.

Indeed, when one was as important as Anshel, the value of his time was different than that of other people; but as a Cinq Flèche higher-up, Van felt he, too, deserved a little more than the average person.

"I can't be sure if your going over Solomon's head implies good news or bad news . . ." Anshel stood in front of the mantle, leaning one hand on it, and spoke to Van with his back to him. Sir Goldsmith's conjectures were spot on, as usual.

"That will be for Sir Anshel to decide." Delighted that a long preface had been cut short, Van returned his right hand from his breast pocket to rest at his side. His brain was feeling low on blood sugar, but he would wait to resolve that until later.

This was the first time he had ever spoken with Anshel without Solomon present. Under the circumstances, it was too early for Van to be letting his guard down.

Solomon's older brother slowly turned around. "So, let's hear it."

Straight to the main course. Van stood straight in a dignified manner. "You are familiar with Professor Aston Collins, the geneticist, are you not?"

Only those who read medical journals should have had any remote familiarity with that name, but Anshel was a well-informed individual. "Collins? About five years ago there was a man by that name who was expelled from the scientific community."

"The same."

Van had been in contact with him as a university student. "He is now a researcher for Red Shield, conducting blood analyses from 'mice'—he was successful in isolating a specific base chemical."

That last statement was Van's trump card.

No matter what, this would be news to Anshel.

Van didn't miss the ripple of interest or the ever-so-faint grin that appeared at the corners of Anshel's lips.

Man and "mouse." Even the Cinq Flèche researchers were unaware that the latter possessed a unique fifth base chemical. This was an unexpected surprise for Anshel. ". . . So how did you come across this information?"

"Collins told me."

There was no more direct truth than that. His expression was sincere, but Van wasn't quite ready to reveal everything as he continued. "He doesn't want his results to remain the secret of a

shadow organization. He hopes he can continue and expand his research in cooperation with us."

It was clear that Collins wasn't fully satisfied with his standing at Red Shield. After several negotiations, Van understood that Collins was more concerned about getting credit for his work than his altruistic actions.

Naturally, there was nothing wrong with that. It was desire that motivated people to action. People connected through common desires, and they could trust each other only when each truly understood what the other wanted.

And now, what did Anshel desire? He wasn't as candid about what he wanted as Solomon.

The whiskers around Anshel's lips clustered awkwardly. "I can see that you are a wise man."

". . . Not without your guidance."

Van's fear of exposure evaporated with Anshel's simple praise.

"So why do you bring this to me? Solomon is your superior, is he not?"

There was no denying this fact. Presently, Van's position at Cinq Flèche was directly subordinate to Solomon. Van should be knocking on Solomon's office door with any important information.

But, Van had gone to the effort of requesting a face-to-face meeting with Anshel.

"Are you trying to stab Solomon in the back?"

Anshel could see Van's shoulders narrow at his pointed question.

"Stab him in the back? Heavens, no."

Anshel appeared to be pleased at his own childish joke, back stabbing or no.

Van went on. "The Delta project is entering the third phase, and there isn't much for me to do. The only real issue is the 'mouse' zooanthropy. With that problem unresolved, the project is still risky."

Anshel didn't say anything.

Van took this as an invitation to continue. In order to keep his tongue moving properly, Van pulled candy from his breast pocket and popped it into his mouth. "First, to encase irregularities in concrete and dump them in the deepest parts of the ocean . . . isn't that overkill? I have a way to resolve this."

"Using Professor Collins, I assume."

"We will be using the results Boris achieved at Kilbed in Iceland."

The strange 'mice' called Schiff that Solomon had caught came from Kilbed. This was as much as Van knew, so to keep Anshel interested he would need to continue carefully.

Van had requested this secret meeting because, by keeping Solomon out of the loop, they would be able to leapfrog the problem and advance the Delta Project.

". . ."

Van could not take his eyes off Anshel's contemplative expression.

He couldn't help but feel like he was being evaluated. The candy in his mouth was exceptionally sticky.

The phone on the table began to ring.

It was a large but efficiently arranged office at the front of the Cinq Flèche headquarters building. Solomon picked up the receiver.

"It's me." The baritone voice from across the Dover Strait sounded exactly as it always did.

"Niisan."

"Two points of business. One is the day we exterminate the locusts."

"What do you mean?"

"Crushing Red Shield."

"You found their base?" Solomon was aware of the emotion in his voice.

After his secret meeting with Saya at the Zoo in Bordeaux, when he had failed to persuade her, Solomon had returned to Paris with Diva. The past several weeks had weighed heavy on his heart.

He could no longer separate himself from the phantom Saya, who was always at his side.

Every moment.

He had never felt this kind of emotion as a Chevalier, and certainly not when he was but a frail human.

Unaccustomed to sleeping, Solomon never felt drowsy, nor did he dream. Yet, he felt the presence of Saya close to him constantly.

His desires had revealed themselves in a hallucination. That must have been it.

However, it would have been out of character for Solomon to embrace such a desire.

Tired of life in the world of man, Solomon Goldsmith had tossed away his human self to escape these very thoughts.

He understood Saya's struggles, wrestling between being human and being Chiropteran. He felt her pain as his own.

To relieve her pain, the humans had to let her go. It was the only way.

Red Shield—they dragged Saya down their trail of carnage as if she were one of their own. Saya was forced to feel indebted to them, and in return, they treated her as if she were a tool. Sisters separated by their blood, murdering their own families, was a very human concept.

To hear his brother say they were going to attack Red Shield was what Solomon had been awaiting for a long time.

Anshel still considered Saya a physical threat to Diva.

Humans didn't matter. But it wouldn't be enough just to kill Saya.

"The extravagant passenger ship presently anchored in Marseille belongs to the Goldschmidt family," Anshel continued.

"Indeed, having it on a ship makes sense. If it is always on the move, pinpointing the location becomes difficult." As he thought out loud, Solomon let out a sigh of admiration.

On the other end of the line, Anshel's reaction didn't seem so enthusiastic. "But once you are discovered, your advantage is lost. From what I understand, the ship will be docked in Marseille through next month. Let's make that month their last."

"Understood. I would recommend taking that month to prepare. Shall I contact Nathan and James?"

Anshel sighed as well. He usually didn't add a lot of detail to his instructions. He was this way in his business dealings, as well, leaving the details to Solomon. And it was Solomon's duty to keep his fellow Chevaliers in line.

But Solomon was suspicious about how Anshel spent all his time when he left all the annoying details to his younger brother. Anshel had gone to evaluate Saya all on his own on Russia, and then there was the facility in Kilbed with the special Chiropterans called Schiff. Solomon's older brother kept too many secrets.

"The other topic is a request I want to make of you," said Anshel.

"Of me?"

"Van Argeno. I want you to return him to me."

Hearing Anshel say Van's name was a surprise. Of course, Van was a very capable individual, but his skills hadn't really blossomed until the Delta Project at Cinq Flèche. He was much more valuable now than he had been during his time at Goldsmith Holdings.

Or could it be that Anshel wanted Van to act as his eyes? For Van, that wouldn't be so bad.

"That will be no problem. His duties are not yet completed here, but I can let you have him."

"Thank you."

"Fine. Well, then . . ." From the time that Solomon hung up the phone to the time he began to move again, the second hand of his watch hadn't moved.

In a sudden burst, documents from his desk flew into the air.

Solomon checked on the status of his empty chair from the corner of his eye as he kicked off the ceiling and landed on the window sill. He followed the attacker's path with his eyes.

What incredible speed.

The figure darted right and left across the carpet and then it was right before Solomon in a blink of an eye. Solomon

blocked the fist with his arm and ducked to avoid a quick roundhouse kick.

A crack ran across the window that made up most of the wall.

Schiff?!

He thought so for a moment, but then Solomon realized that this enemy wasn't really an enemy at all.

After skidding on the carpet beside his desk, Solomon stared hard at his young attacker as they breathed heavily in unison. He still had the youthful features of a boy, but at the same time he looked like a monster starving for meat.

"... Karl."

Solomon spoke the name of the brother he hadn't heard from in nearly six months.

Karl's long glossy black hair was slicked back, and he wore the traditional clothes of Vietnam, just as he had before. He extended his right hand while giving Solomon a fearless crooked smile.

"Won't you give me a reunion handshake?"

This was not the metal arm which had replaced the one Saya had taken from him nearly forty years ago: it looked and felt like real flesh.

The man was Japanese, and he said that his name was Akihiro Okamura.

It was the same name that appeared in his passport, along with the job title "journalist." Louis had been able to confirm from his family records that Okamura was a cameraman for the regional Ryukyu Daily Newspaper.

The girl was Mao Jahana. She said she was Kai's classmate, so she was likely nothing more than a high-school student.

One of their visitors ate like a savage at the dinner table.

David sat with his elbows on the table, resting his chin on his hands, as he glared coldly at Okamura, who sat at the head of the table.

"I suppose asking you to forget everything and go back to Okinawa would be a waste of time."

"Very insightful." Okamura laughed as Louis took a bite of the tasty-looking pasta he had prepared.

"My journalistic sixth sense is whispering to me there is something big going on here. It's going to take more than that to keep me from the truth."

David turned his stare away from the crude Asian man who spoke with his mouth full. He picked up his cup and took a sip of cold coffee.

It wasn't good, but it wasn't bad. It didn't have the ghastly flavor Julia usually brewed, but there was something slightly unsatisfying.

"Where's Kai?" asked Mao. "Why didn't he come to dinner?"

"Hmm. He's probably still asleep."

Louis responded to Mao's thorny questions casually as she reclined on the couch facing him. In front of him were piled four empty dishes. His chubby fingers manipulated his fork skillfully, and a fifth plate was added to the pile as he continued speaking.

"Now that you mention it, I haven't seen Saya since this morning."

"I wasn't asking about Otonashi, was I, Porky?!"

"Hey, hey! Did you hear the mouth on her?" Louis wasn't an innocent victim. He knew that Saya went out every day. She said she was doing research at the library in Paris, but she was probably having trouble forgetting the Aurélien incident.

The death of that Schiff hadn't been Saya's fault.

Nonetheless, it weighed heavily on her. As a warrior, she was still too tenderhearted and thoughtful.

Nothing damaged Saya more than her kindness . . .

It would all be resolved with time, but it had only been three days since Aurélien's death. Not long enough for Saya to bounce back to usual.

But it was more than enough time for an intrusive newspaper reporter to put the screws on someone.

"Tell me everything you know, and start from the beginning."

"Expecting me to suddenly lay our cards down and show our hand is asking a little much." As Okamura wiped the sauce from around his mouth, David could see from his eyes that he was laughing. They were the ill-mannered and dangerous eyes of a hyena—common in talented reporters.

It wasn't David's first time dealing with a man like that. "You don't have the freedom to choose, nor is there room for negotiation."

"Are you threatening me?"

David furrowed the center of his forehead. This man obviously had no idea what kind of situation he had gotten himself into. When you stick your neck into other people's affairs, you must understand the risk of your throat being cut.

"You are already involved. And you have no means to protect yourself—the definition of weak."

This was David's bargaining point.

If Okamura would spit out what he knew, David could promise to keep them safe, and, if possible, protect him from Diva. Thinking about it from the other side, depending on what he knew, Red Shield might adjust their approach.

In the underground warehouse at Vietnam's Lycée du Cinq Flèche, Okamura had seen the fight between Saya and Karl, but not so much that it would be a problem. Photographs could be destroyed. The essential question was how close Okamura was to discovering Chiropterans. If he had gone too deep, it was very possible that he had already aroused the attentions of Cinq Flèche and Goldsmith.

After stirring the water in his cup, Okamura slumped tiredly. "So it isn't a threat."

"Why don't you just tell him?" The curt suggestion came from Okamura's assistant. She seemed annoyed but looked at David with intensity in her eyes.

"You say we are involved, but that goes both ways. In other words, fifty-fifty, you see? If we answer your questions, then you have to do the same."

"Hey! What're you . . . ?" Okamura was flustered as Mao reached into one of his vest pockets, took out a stack of photographs, and tossed them on the table.

"What is this?" David's response came about a half second too late.

". . . Where did you get these?" Louis's shock was clear by the way his fork had stopped moving.

These should never have been seen.

They were black-and-white photos, yellowed with age, and they depicted a tragic scene in Vietnam.

A blood-soaked girl, gripping a sword, stood in the middle of a scene of carnage. The girl's face was unmistakable. It was Saya.

It was that fateful day, the end of a hot and humid Christmas.

Many things had been lost that day.

Saya's hibernation had been interrupted and she had snatched an innumerable number of Chiropteran and human lives. Karl had lost his right arm. Hagi left Red Shield. David had lost his father that day.

So there was another witness, besides George who had survived that massacre.

"This isn't all. That Schiff group, Goldschmidt, the Zoo, Delta-six-seven . . . what does it all mean?" Apparently Mao thought her questions for him carried a higher priority than David's questions for them. "Answer! If you don't I'll send these pictures to all the newspapers in Paris."

"Hey there," Louis cautioned.

Without even looking at Louis, whose eyebrows had risen up his forehead, Mao spoke again, sharply. "Don't try and dick me around! Don't think I won't do it!"

These photos alone wouldn't have been likely to stir up any media attention. If one didn't know about Saya and Chiropterans, the pictures would surely have been rejected as fakes. Mao's threat wasn't as dire as she had intended.

Still, David couldn't help but respect her courage as she stood directly in front of him with fire burning in her eyes.

"Mao!" The reprimand came from outside the living room.

Kai stood on the other side of the door, fresh out of the shower. His hair was still wet.

"Just go home."

"I won't try and escape! Tell me everything I want to know!" Mao jumped from her seat, and Kai turned his head away in a reflexive escape attempt.

"There is nothing to talk about."

"I want to help you, Kai."

"Shut up!" Kai snubbed Mao's plea by turning his back on her.

He probably wanted to keep his friend out of danger, but she was probably feeling the exact same way—or perhaps her feelings went beyond friendship—and wanted to help Kai any way she could. They had rejected each other's offers of help, even though their intentions were the same. David suppressed a laugh at their youthful naiveté.

"He's getting away again!"

Okamura watched Mao follow Kai down the hallway before he spoke again.

"She's not the only one that can help you, you know."

"That will not be necessary."

The last thing Red Shield needed was the cooperation of a journalist. They already had Kai and Riku tagging along. With any more people they would lose the ability to move efficiently and quietly.

But Okamura looked like that was exactly what he wanted to do.

"Hold on. There are three good reasons why we should team up. First, Cinq Flèche doesn't know about us. Next, as a journalist,

I have special connections. I can make press releases and public announcements at your will. I give you another avenue to . . . wait a second, that's four good reasons." Okamura corrected himself as he noticed how many fingers he was holding up.

Louis laughed inappropriately.

It looked as if he might have taken a liking to Okamura. If Louis had been a fellow journalist, David felt they might have been able to get along.

"And on the other hand, I can't think of a single negative to having us join you."

That's where Okamura was wrong.

If David were even going to consider using them as a contact point, there would have to be assurances that none of Red Shield's information would ever be leaked out.

David wasn't sure how the journalist had read his silent reaction, but Okamura's lips slowly curled up in a grin.

"I want to know."

To know the truth. If that truly was all this man was after, then negotiations probably could have been made. However, in his line of business, he would want the truth in order to expose it to the world.

For Red Shield, there would never be a good time to expose the existence of Chiropterans to the general public—at least, not until Diva was dead.

"Wait."

Kai didn't respond.

Mao was pursuing him like a bullet from a machine gun. He had no intention of discussing Saya, Red Shield, Chiropterans, or any of it with her.

He understood too well that, once you know too much, you couldn't get out. If she knew what he did, she would be so scared she would clam up and want to go home. But Kai knew that Mao was not the kind of girl that could pretend not to see it when her friends were in trouble or needed help.

"—Ow!"

Kai was surprised by the sound of a heavy crash and turned around.

The heel of one of her suede boots had snapped, and Mao had fallen to the ground.

"Y'know, you . . ." He had intended to blast a complaint at her, but when he saw the seriousness in her eyes, his words were caught in his throat.

"Is it that girl's fault? Is it because she is around?"

He quickly realized she was talking about Saya.

Ever since they had been together in Okinawa, something about Saya had rubbed Mao the wrong way. It wasn't that she out and out hated her, but at the same time, she couldn't treat her as a friend. Unlike the mellow Kato and Kakimoto, whom Kai used to hang out with, Mao was less of a talker and more of a doer.

Since Saya joined the Miyagusuku family, Kai has changed.

Mao used to say that a lot.

Now that they were away from Okinawa, Mao probably believed that it was Saya's fault that she and Kai had been separated so far from each other.

". . . She has nothing to do with it." That was all he could say.

It was after he spoke that Kai noticed something. Talking about Saya irritated him.

Since Aurélien had died he hadn't been able to look at Saya's face longer than it took to acknowledge her presence. And today, she had left again instead of eating at the apartment. From his bedroom window he could see Hagi and Riku wanting to follow her, but he had not wanted to join them.

Hagi and Riku were Chevaliers—Saya's family by blood.

Kai wasn't.

"Nothing to do with it." Kai repeated his words to himself.

"Bullshit! Hey! Why so grumpy?" Mao was harsh. She couldn't be beat. The only way to win was to escape.

"Don't worry about it." Kai tried to turn away, but Mao wasn't going to let him off so easy.

"I am telling you—I want to help!"

"You're just in the way. A pain in the ass. Go home." Kai's tone was mechanical.

From the corner of his eye he could see Mao stand up and throw her boot his way. He caught it in the air, but not before another piece broke off and came flying at his face.

"Watch it!"

The heel of her other boot flew past his head and into the banister.

Kai looked at Mao and held back any other pointed statements he wanted to say. Instead, he told her, "I can't go home."

Mao looked at the floor after hearing Kai's words, her lips clinched together. It was a few moments before she responded.

"Now that I have seen you and Otonashi fighting those things, I can't go home, either."

"..."

Without answering, Kai set the boot on the floor.

He silently turned his back to her and went down the stairs.

"Kai!"

This time he didn't stop and walked out the front door. No more boots came flying.

After leaving the apartment, Kai didn't really remember where he had walked to or how he had made it there.

He didn't remember what he saw along the way, either.

He simply realized where he had ended up.

From the observation deck of the Eiffel Tower, the city of Paris was painted with the colors of twilight.

The day he had met Aurélien it had been cloudy, and the city had been dark like the dusk hour.

Kai wondered what Aurélien had thought of the city of people.

As he considered this question with no answer, Kai prepared to leave.

It was at that moment he noticed a girl with her fingers intertwined in the protective net looking down onto the city.

"Aurélien . . . ?"

He almost believed it for a moment. But Kai's eyes were playing tricks on him.

It was Saya.

In profile the face looking out upon the limitless expanse of streets and buildings looked a lot like Aurélien. In his present state, Kai's eyes must have been showing him what his heart wanted to see.

Aurélien had wanted to see the future.

Saya wanted to remember the past.

After entering the Zoo, she had been able to recall memories of being born and raised there, but there were still things she didn't remember. There were many things she didn't know about her past.

Kai had read Joel's diary, and he had learned things about his sister's history that even she didn't know.

The answers to her questions were more than likely written in that diary.

However, Kai wasn't confident that it was safe to let Saya know what he knew. Would the Saya of today be able to accept facts that the Saya of the past hadn't even understood . . . ?

Saya didn't notice Kai looking at her.

Illuminated by the setting sun, she stood quietly with her right hand outstretched. She slowly opened her fingers, revealing something red and shiny in her hand.

A Chiropteran crystal—a piece of Aurélien's body.

The bodies of dead Chiropterans turn into a stiff mass of stone, and then crumble into smaller pieces.

The night breeze shook the brilliant scarlet fragment resting on Saya's palm.

Aurélien wanted to be free. The wind gradually wore the crystal into tiny grains and carried them into the air.

She didn't need to be afraid of the sun or worry about conflict. She could just be who she had wanted to be from now until forever.

Saya spent a long time looking into the dark red clouds after Aurélien's body had completely floated away before she turned and looked toward him.

"... Kai." It was a pained voice pretending to be calm.

As Kai walked toward his little sister, he looked beyond the wire net.

"This is where I first met Aurélien."

When he had seen Saya a few minutes earlier, he had been reminded of that day. He had had the same impression of Aurélien then that he did of Saya now.

"She was a lot like you. That's what I was thinking. That must be why ... I knew she was the enemy, but I wanted to help ..."

The wire mesh creaked. Saya was squeezing it tightly with her left hand.

Kai didn't say anything.

Not being able to keep his promise to Aurélien pained Kai immensely, but causing Saya such grief over that was deplorable. It was like when Riku had been dying and Saya helped him. Once again Kai had put all the pressure and responsibility on her.

Kai always felt like there was nothing he could do, so he eventually put everything on Saya's back.

"It helped Hagi and Riku, but my blood killed Father and Aurélien ... What in the world am I?" Saya's eyes wandered in a panic. "I looked up all kinds of things at the library, but didn't learn one thing about Chiropterans. Or about me or Diva ..."

She had resigned herself to fighting. Now she was more concerned about who might be hurt because of the holes in her memory.

Kai hesitated before opening his mouth.

"I . . . know things about you."

"Huh?"

"A little while back, I read something called Joel's diary. Everything about you is written there."

Kai looked at the stunned Saya.

"If you are so worried about yourself, then come and look at it. Read Joel's diary."

Kai believed it would be better for her to read it herself rather than have him try to explain it to her. It might be difficult, but if there were such a thing as fate, then Saya's could be found within that diary. It would have been hard to accept hearing it from someone's mouth.

Saya wasn't sure what to do.

She might have been worried about reading the diary alone.

Kai gave her an awkward smile.

"Remember a little while back when I said I wouldn't change?"

". . . Yeah."

Saya nodded shyly, but Kai had already continued.

"I don't have the power to fight Chiropterans like you do. I am not a Chevalier like Hagi or Riku. I might not be able to protect you and Riku like I want . . . but I can always wait for you to come home."

If there was someone like you always waiting for me to come home—those had been Aurélien's words.

"So I will wait for you and never change."

When the tired and injured Saya came home, Kai would be right there to take her in.

Maybe it wasn't much, but he knew it would mean a lot to his sister.

"Saya-neechan."

From the area near the elevators came Riku's voice.

A group of tourists who had come to see a view of Paris at night were assembled by the elevator doors. From that crowd appeared Riku, and with him was the black-clad figure of Hagi.

"Huh? Kai-niichan?" Riku sounded surprised, and ran even more quickly toward them. Dressed in the formalwear he had received from Joel, Riku looked natural beside Hagi.

"What are you doing here, at this hour?" Kai demanded.

"Well . . . I should be asking you what you guys are up to!"

"Going home from the library. Saya-neechan said she would stop by here."

Kai stole a quick glance at Saya's expression, but she didn't say a thing. It seemed she hadn't told Riku or Hagi she would be performing her own funeral for Aurélien.

The sensitive and perceptive Riku didn't press the issue. Maybe he felt a certain vibe from his older sister. Instead he exclaimed, "It's perfect timing. Let's take a picture, you guys."

Kai must have looked perplexed as Riku grabbed him by the hand.

"Picture?"

"Yeah. Look, over here."

Riku led Saya and Kai into an observation room.

When Kai was in junior high school, he had gone on a school trip to Tokyo Tower, but that was more like an amusement in a shopping area. There were souvenir shops and an aquarium, and Kai remembered everyone being excited by the wax museum.

It wasn't hard to believe that France didn't stand for that kind of stuff. Instead, they had artists drawing portraits and stands selling chocolate.

Next to the stands was a passport photo booth.

"When you say picture . . . you mean in there?" Kai was confused. He had imagined something more designed for tourists visiting the tower, but Riku didn't seem to see the problem.

"Don't complain." With his quick reply, Riku pulled Saya and Kai into the box. As a Chevalier, he didn't have any superhuman strength, but he was still annoyingly pushy.

Passing through the curtainlike shade, Kai almost banged into Saya.

They made it inside, but it was just as cramped as it looked from the outside. This was a booth designed for one person, not three.

"Hagi, you get in the picture, too," Riku insisted.

"I will wait outside." Hagi sounded like he had prepared his answer in advance.

He probably felt like he didn't need to be in a picture of this family of three. Or, he might have simply been aware of the size constraints. Either way, Kai was unable to express how much respect he had for Hagi's compassion right then.

"OK . . . Just give us a minute. We'll be done soon."

No matter how trivial the situation, Hagi didn't bend. Riku knew this, and he didn't push Hagi any further.

Hagi pulled down the curtain from the outside, making the inside of the booth dark.

The three siblings adjusted their positions in the dark.

"The camera is over here, OK?"

"Riku, you have to put the money in first."

"How much?"

"It shouldn't be more than three hundred yen."

"Niichan, it's euros."

"It says right here."

At four euros, it was more expensive than the same machines in Japan. But you could choose different backgrounds, just like *puri-kura* in Japan.

"How about a floral design?"

"Just pick a normal background."

After they had put the money in and made their selections on the touchscreen, it was five seconds until the photo was taken. Riku sat in the center, with his older brother and sister lined up above him.

"Kai-niichan, if you don't scoot in closer, you won't be in the picture."

"All right."

Kai begrudgingly drooped his head and shifted his hips to the center. He was practically cheek to cheek with Saya. Normally, he wouldn't have given it a second thought, but her fragrance suddenly made its way into his nostrils.

Somehow, he was embarrassed. Kai scowled.

At just that moment, the camera's flash ignited.

The camera took two more pictures, and after a full minute the results dropped into the slot. Just like in Japan, there were three pictures lined up vertically.

Riku separated the photos with a pair of scissors attached to a string inside the booth. "It's been a long time since the three of us took a picture together."

Saya brushed her picture with the tips of her fingers and pushed the vinyl sheet aside.

Riku put his photo in his shirt pocket as he skidded past Saya and stepped outside.

"We should have asked Okamura-san to take a picture for us."

"Don't mess around with that guy. There's something about him . . ." Using a high-school student like Mao to get places . . . how low class was that? Kai wondered how long David was going to let him shack up in the apartment.

"The picture we just took is plenty."

"Yeah. You are really cute in this picture, Riku."

"Wha-?"

Riku peered at the photo Saya held lightly in her hand, and frowned. Saya let out a giggle.

"Kai-niichan, you look funny, too."

"Next time we take a picture, smile, OK?" Kai looked at his stiff expression in the photo and made the same face.

"Hagi, let's take a picture together," Riku suggested.

"I . . ."

Just as Hagi was about to give his previous answer to the excited Riku, Saya opened her mouth.

"Not a bad idea."

". . . If that is what you wish," Hagi acquiesced.

Saya laughed and Kai saw her squeeze the finger's of her left hand.

The same fingers that sent Aurélien's crystal into the wind was now protectively holding their family portrait.

"Kai."

As she walked toward the elevators Saya spoke to him.

"I am going to go talk to Joel."

"All right. I'll be waiting for you."

Kai tried to hold his photo without bending it, but he couldn't help but squeeze too hard.

The helicopter that had transported her from the Paris suburb to the port in Marseille had already taken off, but the air from the rotors still rattled the windows.

The young man who owned the helicopter, as well as this massive luxury liner, stood from his chair.

"Hello, Saya. I'm happy you've come to visit me."

Saya walked through the doorway nervously and broke her silence as she gripped his outstretched hand. "Ye-yes, well . . ."

As she tried to start talking about why she had wanted to see Joel, Saya's eyes couldn't help but drift over the top of Joel's desk, which had a single book resting on top. The desk was an old and very expensive-looking piece of furniture. Its shiny brown surface looked like amber. However, the thick, battered, leather-covered book sitting on the desk appeared to have an even longer history.

The gold-lacquered engraved title read "Le journal intime de Joel."

"That was Joel's diary," he told her, following her eyes.

It felt like it had been set there in anticipation of her arrival. This comfortable corner office surrounded by window and bookshelves was Joel's. Black-clad guards were nowhere to be seen.

"Its contents have all been converted to digital form. This is nothing but a symbol."

He rubbed the cover of the diary.

"But it contains the legacy of all who carry Joel's name. In it are all of Joel's memories from the time the Zoo was completed in Bordeaux in 1832."

The modern-day Joel gently gestured toward a chair. "Please."

"Yes, thank you." Saya sat down in the wooden chair that shone as bright as a jewel.

Joel waited for his guest to sit before he did the same.

"Collecting plant and animal fossils from all over the world for research, Joel Goldschmidt was influenced by Lamarck's *Philosophie Zoologique*. He was interested in the evolution of living things."

Saya resisted the urge to flip through the diary's pages and focused her attention on Joel's words.

"One day, he came across a Viking treasure: the old remains of a mummy. Its face had been crushed, but it was clearly the corpse of a pregnant woman. The Vikings had called it a *saya*."

"Sa . . . ya . . . ?" It sounded strange as a noun.

What had those brave Norse invaders of the French and English coasts been thinking of when they named her?

Joel reached across his desk and opened the diary facing Saya.

The lock holding in its secrets had already been unlatched.

The butterfly of her memories spread open its yellowed wings.

Joel's young hands pushed the diary across the desk toward her. The scent of time filled Saya's nose, and her eyes drifted across the rows of ink. She remembered seeing this precise and scholarly handwriting before. It was the old Joel's handwriting.

Welcomed Saya into the Zoo. From what I can tell, it is the mummified corpse of a creature unknown to man. I have named this new creature "Chiropteran."

It appears similar to a human female, but attached to the arms from the wrist to the armpit, to the legs from the abdomen to the femur, and between its fingers are thin membranes unlike anything seen on humans. This is a feature closer to bats, and appears to be a Chiropteran trait.

This mummy feels like a gift from God, showing us the future of man's evolution.

I have decided to dissect the mummy with the assistance of Anshel.

I haven't been this excited since my intellectual curiosity led me to dissect insects as a boy.

Saya hesitated before continuing reading.

What Solomon had told her at the ruins of the Zoo wasn't a deception. Joel's kind and gentle face carefully observed Saya as she returned to the diary.

We made an incision in the swollen belly of the mummy, only to make a fascinating discovery. There were two mysterious masses in the abdomen.

They could only be described as cocoons.

Why would something like this be found inside of a mammal? I have never heard of the existence of any creature quite like this. And each cocoon is as large as an overweight housecat!

I didn't spend much time coming to the decision to dissect the cocoons. However, the stupendously hard shell of the cocoon prevented us from conducting our research.

During the attempted operation, Anshel cut his hand with a scalpel, spilling his blood on the surface of the cocoons. What happened next would surprise anyone. The hard shells of the cocoons became soft and malleable. Not only that, they began to move.

They were alive! These cocoons were alive!

I have difficulty finding the words to describe the excitement of detecting their heartbeats. I thanked God countless times for the experience he gave me that night.

We sprinkled the blood of the servants generously onto the cocoons.

The two cocoons soaked up every drop like thirsty babies at their mother's teat, and with every feeding the pulsations grew stronger and stronger.

August 4, 1833.

From the two cocoons came the first cries of two new lives.

At first glance they looked like two normal human babies, approximately two months postbirth. Both were female.

One will be raised among people, and the other one will be kept completely isolated from the outside world, raised for experimental observation. The first one I have named Saya, after her mother, but I gave no name to the other one. That may seem unnecessarily cruel, but affectionate names are not needed for experimental subjects.

Saya.

With her mother's name she had been raised as a daughter of the wealthy Goldschmidt family.

This is where I began . . .

Just like when Saya Otonashi first met George at the Miyagusuku tomb, Saya Goldschmidt's life had begun when she had received her name from her adoptive father.

But what about Diva . . . ?

"The first Joel was a very kind father to you." Joel took his time in choosing the words that passed between his elegant lips. "However, to Diva he was a cold-hearted researcher, and the thief of her freedoms. She was kept in a gloomy tower, and he provided her with only the bare minimum in food and hygiene. She received no education, no kind words, no love, nothing that a human needed."

"My God . . ."

It sounded a lot like the treatment Aurélien and the other Schiff had received from the people at Kilbed.

Just like the Schiff who were trained to fight, and learned nothing else, Diva had been taught nothing about life.

If it was these actions that had caused Diva become a cruel and brutal person, then Joel had committed the worst sin of all.

"You were also confined, but to the boundaries of the Zoo, and you were given all the freedoms and amenities a person could want. Trapped in what was essentially a small, dark box, Diva lived life as a beast. Besides the birds she saw flying in the air, the spiders that hatched in her cell, and the blue roses that grew in the tower, the only other living beings she knew of were Joel and his assistants."

The unique characteristics of his experimental subject had sparked great interest in Joel.

The greatest feature of the Chiropteran was its amazing healing abilities, which made it virtually immortal.

Saya and Diva both had incredible regenerating abilities, but the moment one's blood came in contact with the other's, the mixture coagulated and then crystallized. Joel was the first to discover this fact.

But something put a damper on his desire to continue his research.

Joel was already in his sixties, and in those days that meant he was probably near the end of his life.

On the other hand, the Chiropteran lifespan went on infinitely.

When Joel realized that Saya's and Diva's bodies had stopped developing at the equivalent of sixteen-year-old humans, the normally enthusiastic scientist took the news bitterly.

"Once he understood that you two held the secrets of the fountain of youth, and that his time was almost up, Joel focused his research on your reproductive potential."

"You mean, if we could have children?"

Hearing the truth from this forthcoming young man about the detestable experimentation she had undergone brought Saya a real sense of relief.

The young Joel didn't try to defend his ancestor's actions, but told the truth of the matter as he knew it. In his quiet and calm tone, she could hear his resignation regarding the actions of the family he was otherwise genuinely proud of.

"Correct. That was when they started to prepare grooms for you. The reason was to confirm that you could be fertilized."

Live human testing.

Even though the original Saya's daughters were Chiropterans, the grooms Joel had chosen were, of course, humans. It wasn't only plants and animals that Joel researched, but human beings as well, it appeared.

So the unlucky man chosen to be her groom was . . .

"Hagi . . ."

"That's right. He was purchased for that purpose and brought to the Zoo."

The image of the painful tears he had cried soon after they met was resurrected in Saya's mind.

His purpose had been decided before he arrived—and after he had completed his job, he would have been disposed of. Even as a child, Hagi had been wise. He had never thought of himself as the lucky recipient of the charity of a rich old man.

How anxious and miserable he must have been.

Saya felt bad about how uncompassionate she had been back then.

Joel turned the pages of the diary once again.

This time, the page he stopped on looked like a heavy snowstorm.

There were no words. Only a few brownish stains dripped onto the edge of the page. Once Saya realized they were blood, she discerned what day it had been when the old Joel had made this entry.

"It was a Sunday in 1883 . . ."

The gold chain at Joel's chest rattled softly.

There was a crack in the face of his pocket watch and the hands were frozen in place. The glass refracted the light pouring in through the window, painting crystal-like patterns across the bookshelf on the wall.

"Ever since then, this pocket watch's hands have not moved a second. Time has stopped for the Goldschmidt family."

". . . Joel's birthday."

"Yes. Bloody Bordeaux Sunday. And the instigator of that tragedy was—"

"—Diva."

The silhouette of a girl with her back to the burning mansion.

"You know all about that day, don't you? Someone released Diva from her bonds, allowing her to start her deadly massacre."

Saya stopped breathing for a moment.

The atmosphere of the room felt heavy and there was a long and profound silence.

The sounds of waves that weren't there began to bury Saya's anxiety.

Joel *didn't know.*

He didn't know who had let Diva free.

"Th-that was . . ."

Her voice had trouble forming words. Saya's knees knocked together and her surroundings began to tremble.

She needed to confess.

Confess her sin.

"That was . . . me . . . who let her out of the tower . . . and named her . . . it was me."

"What? What are you saying?"

She wasn't prepared for this conversation, but Saya did the best she could to find the words to explain what had happened. "I . . . would play with her . . . I wanted a friend . . . She . . . would sing songs . . . and they were beautiful, she was so talented . . . and I loved her singing . . ."

"What are you talking about? Tell me. What is it that you know?"

"It was all . . . me . . ." Saya's fingers gripped the surface of her skirt so tightly it wrinkled, and she held her head low in shame.

There had been a misunderstanding.

Joel and the men and women of Red Shield had no idea who was responsible for releasing Diva and allowing her to spread terror and death across the world.

And so they had protected Saya and she fought for them . . . it was so absurd that she wanted to tear her own body to pieces. Knowing the truth, would Joel still want Saya to fight for them?

At first it had been nothing more than a fleeting interest in beautiful music.

Saya found out the singer was also a young girl, and that they shared the same looks, when she spoke softly to her through the thick oak door.

"Who are you?"

". . . who?" The same beautiful voice from the songs came through the trellis gaps.

"I'm Saya. What's your name?"

"Name?"

"Don't you have a name?"

She responded with silence.

This poor, imprisoned girl didn't even have a name. And her voice was amazing, her eyes so beautiful.

"Then I will give you a name. Let's see . . . I know! Diva!"

Saya thought this name fit her perfectly.

"The princess with a beautiful voice—Diva!"

"Di . . . va . . . ?"

After several seconds of bewildered silence, the girl's cheeks rose to reveal a smile.

"I am . . . Diva?"

"That's right. You are Diva."

Saya decided she wanted to give her another present to make her happy.

"Let's be friends. Would you like that, Diva?"

Without a doubt, they would be the best of friends. Her premonition would certainly come true.

Their meeting was meant to be.

Diva's smile slid into Saya's heart like the missing piece of a puzzle.

Before picking lilies with Hagi on the morning of Joel's birthday, Saya had retrieved the key and opened the door to Diva's cell. She had wanted

to play with her friend outside, nothing more. The song of the caged bird sounds sweeter when it is freed.

She intended to surprise Joel by introducing him to Diva. Saya had never considered why Diva had been locked behind that door.

"Hagi is calling me, so I will see you a little later."

"Saya . . . I'm, scared . . ."

"I will be with you. There will be so much to eat at the party—let's stuff ourselves."

"Yes, let's."

Saya grasped the limp bluish-white hand that was extended between the iron bars before running down the dark staircase to meet Hagi at the foot of the tower.

Joel had told her not to enter the tower. Saya expected Hagi was going to be angry. He had gotten more strict with age and talked down to her more often.

From behind her came the creak of a door opening.

That was the Sunday in Bordeaux.

Hearing her confession, Joel remained calm, but seemed disturbed.

"Saya, you . . ."

"It was all my fault . . . I am . . ."

The same as Diva.

She brought sadness and death to the people around her.

Saya didn't need to read the words in the diary. She could see the images in her head.

Red flowers bloomed into the black night sky.

Blood and fire.

It was the night when the Red Shield forces were attacked by the Chiropterans in the U.S.-occupied village in Vietnam. It was that night.

The sounds of machine-gun fire rattled off here and there, mixed into the spray of blood marking the path of death.

Long-surviving jungle-dwelling members of the Viet Cong were killed as instantly as the new recruits who still carried shaving razors and pictures of their families.

In the middle of the death and confusion and mayhem, Saya closed her eyes.

The spirit to fight burned through her veins.

"—Saya!"

The voice shook the tent and sounded like the cry of a beast.

Her hair rustled.

Diva's Chevalier—her prize.

Saya grabbed her katana, which was lying next to her, and sat up as she scanned her surroundings.

Inside the tent were one, two, three . . . eight men.

Saya was on top of an operating table, which she quickly leapt off of.

She made no distinction between friends and foes.

Her naked blade sliced as easily as the breeze, painting a trail of blood in its path.

"Lieutenant!"

"We must sto-!"

The blond officer with the fearless features pulled out his revolver and started firing.

Her sword deflected the bullets, resulting in nothing more than a few sparks in the air.

A wordless cry rumbled from deep in Saya's throat.

Baring wolflike fangs, she jumped again.

Not one of the gun-wielding humans was able to defend himself.

Saya slashed a hole in the tent and pushed through to the outside.

The thatched roof of a house collapsed, weakened by fire.

The orange flames revealed the uneven earth covered with human bodies.

Some lay undisturbed, but others were being eaten by stocky apelike creatures.

Chiropterans.

Saya's eyes grew redder and redder as a murderous streak pumped through her body.

Kill.

They must be killed.

Kill everything she saw, and rid the world of them.

Saya dashed about, her jumpsuit already speckled with red and white spots.

Her blade swung about at the soldiers firing their assault rifles wildly and the villagers desperately trying to escape. The men's bodies gave some resistance, but the children were relatively soft.

The flesh-eating Chiropterans looked at her with the fearful eyes of frightened hares. One by one, their bodies crystallized into stone as Saya ran through the village.

What interrupted this flow was a sharp sound in the night.

Saya effortlessly avoided the claws falling from high above and rolled onto her hands and knees. However, it was clear this Chiropteran wasn't as thickheaded as his comrades.

"Saya, we meet at last."

This Chevalier must have led the Chiropteran attack of this camp.

The singing voice rattled the vapor in the humid night air.

"... Di ... va."

"It's time to remove those fangs that hurt us so."

A beastly arm rose into the air in a theatrical gesture.

As the goblin laughed, a silver blade was thrust through its right eye socket.

"How crude!" Without removing the dagger, the Chevalier turned toward his attacker.

There stood a tall young man in a black suit.

"Saya. Be careful."

She remembered seeing this man before. Yet, any familiarity had been violently erased.

Opponent. What she needed now was an opponent.

One more, here, now, to satisfy her craving.

"Don't interrupt us!"

There was no laughter in the Chevalier's pointed cry, followed by a spewing shower of mud.

The black-clad man raised an arm to shield his eyes.

Suddenly, in a tornado of mud and earth, the monster appeared just before Saya's eyes.

But it wasn't he who had moved.

With both its wings spread, the Chevalier's chest was exposed. Saya careened toward it.

"Saya . . ."

The response of the surprised monster as he dodged her attack told Saya that this was indeed one of Diva's Imperial Guard.

Her spinning sword was successful in lopping off his right arm at the elbow.

"Gwaaaa!" The Chevalier fell past Saya into the corpse-filled muck, writhing in pain and terror.

Saya had applied her blood to her sword, and it was now eating away at the Chiropteran's body tissue, converting it to crystal.

His next cry was one of angry resignation.

The Chevalier buried the claws of his left hand into the skin of his upper right arm. As the muscles of his left arm swelled, the flesh of his right shoulder was torn apart with a strange crackle.

This wound, well above the cut from Saya's sword, overflowed with fresh blood as the dreadful sound continued.

In order to stop the spread of crystallization throughout his body, this Chevalier was literally cutting off its path by removing the remains of his arm.

". . . Saya." His hateful cry rose up from the blood and muck on the ground, and the Chevalier turned his head to look at her as a chill ran through his body.

His eyes met the glare of the girl standing above him. From the darkness of the ancient jungle came the stare of a creature functioning without reason. The crimson pupils boiled with the single desire to bring death.

Saya's bare feet splashed into the blood-soaked mud.

The Chevalier shrank back, twisting away. No longer able to soar into the sky, he ran clumsily away, with Saya in close pursuit.

A fleeing child tumbled from a burning hut and across Saya's path.

Without a thought, Saya swung her blade downward.

"Saya! No!"

Her sword was stopped in midair by a dagger in a young man's hand.

Another enemy.

The heel of her right foot sunk into his stomach, sending him flying backward.

He hit a support pole of the burning hut, which sent the roof crashing in, causing showers of sparks to fall to the ground. Despite it all, the young man quickly got back to his feet.

He seemed less physically injured than mentally anguished.

"Saya . . . Do you not know who I am?"

"Gyaaa!" Saya screamed like a carnivore, and ran toward the falling sparks.

She came straight at the young man as she slashed her sword from above her head.

The orange sparks faded out.

The man prevented his own beheading with a deft block with his dagger, but Saya followed him like a shadow.

There was no art or expertise to her swordplay. It was simply a whirlwindlike frenzy. Each swing was fast and heavy. He wasn't able to block every strike with his dagger.

"Urk!"

The dagger broke into pieces and flew into the air, and Saya looked at the man coolly as he dropped to his knees.

She breathed bloodlust through her teeth.

The young man's shoulders shivered.

The right sleeve of the man's jacket swelled until it tore away, and his right arm transformed into that of a Chiropteran.

Chevalier.

Saya leaned in and bolted forward.

He swung his body away from her attack, but from the elbow where his right hand had been came a fountain of blood.

"Ugwaa . . . !" The man covered the exposed cross section of his forearm with his left hand and, intending to put him out of his misery, Saya crossed his back before she leapt to give the killing blow.

A moment later the claws of a giant arm sunk into the earth. Saya's right arm swung, and her blade sliced horizontally, sending another Chiropteran's detached head sailing to the ground.

Her face was soaked in the crimson spray as she landed flush on the earth. Like honey to ants, she had attracted the attention of the monsters in the dense jungle.

She intended to leave not even one alive.

She leaned back and roared toward the sky.

+

Saya's body trembled from the frightfully real memory.

"I am the same as Diva . . . The people around me, even Hagi . . ."

Hagi's hand had probably transformed into Chiropteran mode as a self-defense reflex. He had been scared.

Forced to rely on his own blade, in Hagi's heart, trust and faith had been devoured by despair. She couldn't fathom the hopelessness he must have felt trying to protect his own life from Saya's attack.

This was why he had disappeared until Saya opened her eyes once again in Okinawa. Maybe the fact that his right hand remained in its monstrous shape was a form of punishment.

She had hurt Hagi again, without even knowing what she was doing.

The pain of that coupled with the sin of slaughtering so many people was overwhelming.

The soldiers and villagers she had massacred in Vietnam had nothing to do with the Chiropterans.

"Vietnam, 1967 . . ." After listening attentively to Saya's confession, Joel finally spoke.

"Hagi didn't return to us after that day. At one point, he was spotted in Hong Kong, but I understand we weren't able to get him to come back. Perhaps he held some distrust for Red Shield after you went crazy."

Saya lifted her head from her knees and looked Joel straight in the eyes.

The young head of the Goldschmidt family removed a single photograph from his desk drawer and held it out to her.

"This is the David of the previous generation. He is the father of the David you are familiar with."

"David-san's . . . ?"

The face of the youthful uniformed military man in the picture certainly did look a lot like David.

He had been the second lieutenant the soldier had called when Saya first opened her eyes inside the tent. The gun he had wielded was the same one the David she knew always carried.

David and Kai both carried their fathers' pistols. The same legacy.

". . ."

Saya squeezed her hands together so tight they almost lost all feeling.

David had said it.

—*My father died on a Red Shield mission.*

But she was the one who had killed him.

Naturally, David was already aware of this. Yet he had never said a word. He had taken no satisfaction in blaming and abusing and striking out. When they had lost George, she had hated herself . . .

However, David wasn't like that. Even after what she had done, he still accepted her as one of their own. He didn't condemn his father's murderer, but kept her near, fought by her side, and protected her life as his own.

Why? There was only one reason.

To destroy Diva.

"In 1967, we received eyewitness reports of Chiropterans in war-torn Vietnam. We concluded that the sleeping Diva couldn't have been far, and entrusted you to the previous David and his troops."

Diva's and Saya's life cycles were more or less synchronized. When Diva was dormant it meant Saya was also hibernating.

"It was only a theory, but it could be assumed that the Chevalier guard could kill Diva in this state and meet with no resistance. We decided to perform a forced awakening."

"Forced?"

"Yes. We knew that after you and Diva awaken, you immediately ingest your Chevaliers' blood. It's called your 'wake-up blood.' We injected Hagi's blood directly into your body. You were in an in-between state at the time . . ."

The result was the massacre that night.

"By the time the rescue teams arrived, you were already back in the 'sleep' and Hagi and Diva were nowhere to be found. On the verge of death, David asked that you be entrusted to the care of one of his subordinates, George Miyagusuku."

"Father . . ."

"Correct. At that time, we worked together with the U.S. military, but David did not want you to be put into their care, even temporarily. After we had received consent from David's trusted colleague, George, you were secretly moved to Okinawa without rousing suspicion from the army."

After that, retired veteran George had welcomed orphans Kai and Riku into his home and opened up his pub restaurant, Omoro. About a year and a half ago, Saya had emerged from

her cocoon in the crypt and became the fourth member of the Miyagusuku clan.

Her happy and perfect year of life in Okinawa was due in part to countless deaths in Vietnam.

Knowing none of this, she had gazed at the blue skies and the ocean at sunset, spending the days laughing with Kaori and all their friends . . . as foolish as a child.

"Since that day, we were unable to pinpoint Diva's whereabouts, but we continued to fight . . . waiting for you to wake up once again." Joel's eyes sparkled with fervor, but he wasn't trying to coerce Saya. He was radiating a true passion anchored deep inside.

"And now, here you are, right in front of me."

Saya had trouble meeting Joel's intense eyes.

Yet, she still had questions she wanted to ask the descendant of Joel Goldschmidt.

"I would like you to tell me one thing."

"What is it?"

"Don't you feel a kind of guilt, carrying on Joel's name?"

The young man was not able to answer immediately.

He picked his pocket watch up off the desk and then rose from his chair. As he gazed out the window at the harbor, his thumb traced the craftsmanship on the surface of the watch, as he considered his family's history.

". . . Even if we turn around and look at yesterday, we can not take anything back. What can we do for tomorrow? That's human thinking. So I accepted his name. I did so to put an end to all of this."

Put an end to all of this . . . That was the desire of all the members of Red Shield, Saya thought.

Young Joel was the man to make this dream come true. To make up for the sins of the very first Joel, he had taken his name and his fight.

That thinking overlapped with Saya's.

She remembered things from long ago.

It had been when steam engines were the forefront of technology. She and Hagi were riding in a first-class car on the Austrian railway. Diva had escaped from them in Russia, and they must have been retracing their steps back to Europe.

Examining the scene outside their compartment window, Saya had suddenly begun to speak.

"It's a promise, Hagi. Once this is all over . . ."

The interruption by the steam whistle had sounded like Hagi's cry.

Hagi had waited for the high-pitched shriek to die down before he spoke.

"If that is what you wish."

Both his facial expression and tone of voice had been calm, but he had appeared to be made of an unnatural substance impervious to pain.

Saya had known his feelings, and that was why she had spoken from the heart.

"Thank you."

"Saya?"

"Yeah. She went to read Joel's diary."

David asked him again without thinking, and looked at the candid Kai's nodding head before returning his gaze to the surface of the Seine.

"I see."

"It's not like that's a problem. She's a member of Red Shield, too. Those who want to fight Chiropterans are supposed to read it. At least that's what *you* told me."

The younger man stood with both hands stuffed in the pockets of his cargo pants and the same frank expression he always wore, but the wrinkle in the center of his forehead was less pronounced than it had been the day before.

In talking with Saya, he must have understood much of what was going on.

They were brother and sister. Family. No matter how much they fought, that relationship would never become superfluous. David didn't think Saya would run away from the fight again. However, it didn't take much for that blade to become dull. Unfortunately, it wasn't Red Shield, but Kai and Riku who could prevent that from happening

"That's what's going on. Later." Kai curtly turned to walk away.

David watched Kai walk far down the lamplit esplanade before sighing sadly.

"A member, huh . . . ?"

An extremely ambiguous word that could be defined so simply.

A person who would give his life to reach the mutual goal. That's what David required from a "member." Louis and Joel, Clara, Spencer, Elizaveta, and, of course, Julia.

Where did Saya fit in?

She was an indispensable weapon in the fight against Chiropterans; the daughter of his new friend, George; his father's killer; the sister of mankind's greatest enemy, Diva . . . she had too many faces, filled too many roles. To be frank, David wasn't sure what to do with Saya.

As he considered these thoughts, the air at his back moved.

It sounded like someone sitting back on the bench behind him.

There was no reason to feel threatened, but David casually turned his head. To his surprise, he saw nothing but the chilled night air.

—?

He was sure he had sensed the presence of someone.

"You are with Red Shield, aren't you?" The voice resonated from a completely different direction. The tone sounded like someone asking for directions.

But the number of people who had ever heard of Red Shield was miniscule, and the number who knew David was a member was even smaller.

". . . Solomon Goldsmith."

He was sitting on a bench on the other side of the esplanade with his long legs crossed, like an angel that had just fallen from the heavens to greet David.

David's right hand reflexively went for the pistol inside his chest holster, though he realized it wouldn't be of much use.

The blond-haired young man sitting on the bench was gone, not leaving even a shadow, and the voice came again from behind him.

"A thing like that won't be any good against me."

David had no choice but to accept this.

At this distance, a Chevalier could have his blade at his throat before David could pull the trigger.

"I expect you will listen to what I have to say."

"Please, take all the time you need. I wonder what Diva's Chevalier would want to tell me."

David's direct response was partially in relief that this confrontation had occurred after Kai was safely on his way back. If David were killed, then Louis would take over his duties. It wouldn't be that big a blow to the organization.

However, Solomon's next words made David's heart skip a beat.

"I heard about your group from someone inside Red Shield. You are working out of Marseilles now, correct?"

This was a useless question. He already knew the answer. The luxury liner housing Red Shield mobile headquarters was docked in Marseilles.

"In one month, we will make an attack on your headquarters."

"..."

Did he mean Diva's Chevaliers were planning to lead a Chiropteran attack?

Or did they have another way—like the U.S. Army in Okinawa? With their financial muscle and personal connections, was Solomon hinting at an unlawful assault that would appear legal?

Regardless, all David knew was that if there were an attack, this young buck was going to be a part of it. As a matter of order, David took his words in all seriousness.

"I am not lying." Solomon laughed coyly as he said these words. David suspected that Solomon wasn't being forthcoming.

Beaten to the punch, David responded coolly, "Why would our enemy give us such information?"

"We do not all want to kill Saya."

Solomon's tone implied that any light talk had already ended.

"To be honest, I wholly disagree with the actions of Red Shield. You push Saya into combat, extending the fight between humans and Chiropterans. If Niisan's goal were to bring down your organization, it would thrill me to no end."

His inflection implied they had the power to do just that.

"But, Niisan sees Saya as dangerous, and doesn't want to deal with her. Now me . . ."

Suddenly Solomon's sentence stopped short.

It felt like he was standing up, but David didn't turn around.

"I am asking you for Saya's sake. In one month, please take Saya and get away."

The young man's speech returned to the proper polite tone. "On that note, I will excuse myself."

His feet made no sound. There was only a sudden gust of wind.

David recognized this as a Chevalier's exit.

The hand gripping the pistol under his tailored jacket moved to the pocket holding his cell phone.

He needed to relay and confirm this information.

He dialed Joel's direct line and waited.

"Oh, hello there, David."

Unfortunately, there wasn't time to exchange pleasantries this time.

"Chief, there is a possibility that Diva's forces are planning an attack on the headquarters in one month's time."

"Chiropterans? Do you have solid information?"

"You might not believe this, but I got this directly from Solomon Goldsmith of Cinq Flèche."

"The Chevalier . . . ?" Stunned, Joel stumbled upon his words.

In the Orient, showing compassion to one's enemy wasn't unheard of, but it seemed very unlikely that was the case here.

If Joel hadn't been aware of Solomon's personal feelings toward Saya, then David's report would have been easy to disregard.

However, it didn't take long for Joel to make a decision on the matter.

"Understood. Happily, Saya is now here with us. I'd like you and your members to return to headquarters as soon as you can. Solomon's warning could be a trap. We'll get prepared on this end for a counterattack."

"Roger."

This was the most reasonable approach. David hung up the phone with renewed faith in his commander's abilities.

David's thumb scrolled down the list of numbers in search of Louis's phone number, but then stopped.

David called a different number.

From inside her purse, her phone informed her she had a call.

"Pardon me."

As Collins peered her way, Julia set the phone to silent mode.

But first, she checked and saw that the caller was David. Since most of his communications came via Louis, this call must have

been especially important. And now, at the exact time she couldn't take it.

The reason was that she wasn't at Red Shield headquarters at that moment, but at a nobleman's mansion in England.

What would the professor want in a place like this . . . ?

He had requested that Julia accompany him on a trip across the channel—officially a vacation from their Red Shield duties. There must have been a good reason.

"This is an incredible opportunity for you." As he lifted his teacup from the top of the table, Collins took in the smell of the high-quality leaves. He brought the cup to his lips, which curled into a smile.

"As a researcher, you're only just beginning to blossom."

Julia accepted the words from her mentor at face value. "But, society doesn't know about our research, and it will disappear along with the Chiropterans . . ."

"But does it really have to be like that?"

"Hn?"

"Think of the significance of the work we do. Red Shield cannot make any of our research public because it has to do with Chiropterans. But even with results like this? The potential benefits to the future of mankind are uncountable."

More than his irritated tone, there was something that made Julia skeptical of his conclusions.

Something wasn't right with Professor Collins.

". . . What was his proposal to you?"

More than a little wary of the situation, Julia cast her eyes toward the young man standing by the door.

The elegance of the room wasn't thrown off by how the snobbish man fiddled with a piece of wrapped candy in his fingers.

She hadn't laid eyes on this superficial-looking face in years.

He noticed Julia and gave a courteous smile. "You'll excuse me. Please wait just a little longer. The commander should be arriving any moment."

"Commander? Commander of what?"

"Why don't you ask him directly, Julia Silverstein?" Just like back in school, he still had the same officious tone.

"I never expected to meet you again at a place like this, Van Argeno. How do you plan to use us?"

His thin lips parted as Van turned the candy with the tips of his fingers.

"I want nothing more than to ensure that our esteemed Professor Collins is properly recognized throughout history. I would be so delighted if his lovely and wise assistant would cooperate in making that happen."

It was hard to tell how much of what he was saying was true. Either it was all a joke to him, or he was trying to hide his sincerity behind a veil of aloofness.

"And here I thought you didn't like me." In fact, Julia was getting that sense right now, but Julia had more sense than to say something that audacious out loud.

Van's shoulders drooped. "I was only jealous that such a beautiful and intelligent classmate was admitted entry into Professor Collins's laboratory."

He made it sound like it had been only her looks and grades that had caught Collins's attention.

Obviously, Julia's instincts were correct. And he talked too much. In one week he surely said more words than David said in a year.

"Julia-kun understands the research I am conducting now better than anyone."

In an attempt to spark a positive connection between these two former classmates, Collins broke into the conversation. "This discovery wouldn't have been made without her."

Van's eyes narrowed at Collins's words. He pushed his glasses up his nose and straightened his back.

"That's what I understand. I cannot wait to hear what kind of progress you have made since."

"By all means." Collins was enjoying every moment of this. He returned his teacup to its saucer and dabbed a napkin to the sides of his mouth.

"I talked to you about the fifth base chemical, didn't I?"

"Yes. It was a stimulating talk on a subject I have a great interest in. As soon as we heard it, we knew that Professor Collins and Ms. Julia would be indispensable in our research."

"Professor . . ." Julia was surprised by what she heard and stared at Collins with as much respect as she could muster.

Even within Red Shield, only David and Joel had been told about the discovery of the new base chemical, and here, an outsider had already been informed.

Collins didn't appear to register Julia's concern.

"Van Argeno, you've heard my objections before. Don't you think this is a little strange?"

"I do. Why did it take so long to discover the fifth base chemical? . . . Our Cinq Flèche researchers are certainly dedi-

cated and capable, and we have all the equipment and samples needed. The professors we studied under were no slouches, either."

"But the person who discovered it was Julia-kun," Collins said.

She realized how the expressions of people drunk with superiority could change. The philosophical Collins, who sacrificed nothing for his research, had an expression of pride similar to a father listening to his child's speech at an elementary-school parents' day event.

"The difficulty has been the active rewriting of the molecular structure following the base chemical's expression."

"You mean there is a fixed period in which you must collect the data . . . ?"

"Exactly. You probably didn't find it because you weren't looking for it."

"I am sure your words hold the truth. Our staff deals with . . . you say 'Chiropterans'? They treated them as failures of the Delta Project. I regret not teaching them that failure is the mother of success." As Van paced across the room's carpet, he removed hard candy from its wrapper and placed the contents in his mouth.

"We have named that base chemical the 'Base D'."

"D . . . ?"

"D for 'disguise.' Once detected, it alters its shape in order to hide. Isn't that remarkable?"

Collins snorted through his nose annoyingly.

Sitting down on the sofa across from them, Van laughed sarcastically. "But what of the crucial functions of Base D? It doesn't just show its face and disappear, right?"

"Of course not. Base D is the amazing chemical that transforms a human into a Chiropteran. It is designed to synthesize proteins in a completely different way from common vertebrates, creating steel-like skin and superhuman strength. It's possible the Chevalier transformations are a short-term, back-and-forth rendering of this process."

Van considered Collins's explanation as if he were looking into an electron microscope. He glared at him like a customer glaring at the *garçon* at a sidewalk café.

"I see. For Base D to survive, it finagles freely with the flesh . . . That sounds plausible."

"You're quite the poet."

"Much obliged, to be sure."

A poet would be more aware of his unoriginal lines. Van suspiciously stepped over to the window.

As if on cue, a cell phone began to ring.

Van pulled his phone from his suit pocket.

This time Collins did not look at Van with distrusting eyes.

"—Oh, Sir Anshel."

With his phone to his ear, Van announced who was on the other end with pride. He obviously wanted his guests to hear, but unfortunately, Julia didn't know who he was talking about.

After brief greetings, Julia reluctantly watched her old classmate as he suddenly became flustered on the phone.

"I can't just . . . I understand it is urgent, but . . . Professor Collins has already arrived. The next opportunity? When would that be?"

With Van in a state of confusion, it appeared that the person on the other end hung up.

As Van turned around, his expression looked as if the candy in his mouth had turned to bitter coffee.

"Sounds like you got some bad news?"

Van looked away from Julia's gaze and pushed his glasses up his nose.

"Please accept my apologies. The commander has some other business he cannot pry himself away from at the moment . . . Is there any way I could ask for a little more of your time? We would be honored to have the two of you stay here in this mansion as our special guests."

"Fine with me."

"Professor!"

Impatient with the agreeable Collins, Julia stood up from her chair. "I am going back to headquarters. You know my passion for this research quite well, but I . . ."

But I—?

She was a shield for Saya, to allow her to fight the Chiropterans and save humanity. Just like David.

All he knew was to fight—no, that's what he wanted people to think. All his desires were suppressed and his frustrations focused on destroying his enemies. David might have been the perfect example of the time-honored traditional male warrior. It wasn't as natural for a female like Julia.

There was something about this characteristic of his Julia found fascinating. Could it be that . . .

"Do you believe that ridding the world of Chiropterans is the best path? Maybe it is we who are the destroyers. Of the will of Mother Nature, I mean." Collins's withered hand grabbed Julia's

sleeve. "On top of that, the place we are supposed to return to won't be there anymore."

"Won't be there . . . ?"

The way Collins tossed the words out like specimen-covered gloves into the disposal caused a cold shiver to go down her spine.

I want to talk to Saya.

That was what Mao had been thinking as she went to the library, but Saya wasn't there. She was always there, in a gloomy mood, looking for books, yet today she must have changed her mind.

Saya's little brother and the handsome guy were absent, also.

"Don't tell me they took off with Kai . . ."

Kai could have left the apartment after her, and then all of them might have met up at a predetermined location. If that were the case Mao, who had come to the library to talk to Saya, would look like a real fool.

It wasn't like Mao intended to do anything mean or hurt her.

It was true that ever since Saya had showed up in Okinawa Mao had had it in for her. Suddenly Kai had had a sister living in his house, riding on the backseat of his motorcycle where only Mao used to ride . . . who wouldn't have been annoyed by that?

If Kai had left Okinawa because of some selfish problem of Saya's, then there was no point in fighting about it. But that wasn't what had happened.

Saya was fighting.

Mao truly had no idea what was going on, but she knew they were up against an unthinkably dangerous group. The pain and struggles Saya had seen in battle were now written all over her face. The clumsy girl with a voracious appetite from the track team was gone, replaced by a strong girl forged from steel.

Mao wanted to know what it was that she and Kai were up against.

She wanted to know if there were something she could do to help.

Were her intentions really so shameless? Was she really such a stranger to Kai that he could so easily tell her to go home without listening to what she had to say?

"Dammit . . ."

Swearing to herself, Mao punched the stone entry to the library, and a dull pain spread through her fist.

She gripped her hand tightly as she headed home.

Not exactly home, but toward the Goldschmidt apartment. At first she had walked everyday from the hotel to their apartment, but at some point, with all the food the black guy, Louis, had offered her, the apartment building had sort of become her rental house in Paris.

The sky was already a deep blue.

Mao hurried down the street to get back before it got dark, and she had an unpleasant suspicion as she walked to the entrance.

None of the lights were on.

Her heart was pounding as she realized that the door to the apartment was unlocked. Mao sped into the living room and saw an empty cube, illuminated by the weak light from outside.

All the furniture, fixtures, equipment, and supplies had been removed. There was nothing here.

The computers and wireless radios and frying pans shouldn't have been gone. They came with the residents.

"We got played."

The only other person in the room stood there scratching his head.

"What happened?! Where is Kai and everyone?!"

He had arrived before she had, so Okamura might know something. Mao took a step closer to the surprisingly calm man.

"I went to go buy some film and just got back. This was stuck in the doorway." Okamura pulled a scrap of paper from one of his vest pockets.

Mao snapped the folded paper from between his fingers and opened it. Her eyes scanned the brief note written in Japanese.

—If something happens I will get in touch with you.

There was no mistaking Kai's almost illegible writing.

Mao crumpled the paper in her hand as her jaw tightened. "This can't be happening! Kai got away again!"

Mao was incensed, but since the paper didn't say, "Go back to Okinawa," she was able to muster a little hope despite the massive setback they had just encountered.

After that girl, Aurélien, had died, it had seemed like Kai and Saya had developed some issues with each other that had only just begun to be repaired. At least that was how Mao saw it.

03

THE WIND WAS especially strong.

One part of the Cinq Flèche Group conglomerate was Cinq Flèche France, with an office building not quite as tall as the Eiffel Tower. From the all glass top floor it was easy to see why it was said that they had the best view of Paris.

The sky garden would have been like a maddening dream for any student of the Renaissance era, and there were exhibits depicting the theory of evolution, but to Solomon, the most important part of this place was the miniature garden dedicated to his mother.

After leaving an uneventful board meeting, Solomon came up to the garden and discovered that Diva wasn't there.

"—Diva?"

"Yes, Niisan." Solomon spoke into his cell phone as he walked across the fossils trapped in stone and answered the question of his brother who was separated from him by the English Channel.

"It seems that Diva is up to her ugly habits."

"What about Karl?"

"He has already left."

After seeing Diva for the first time after a very long interval, he had hungered to get back into the swing of things. As a follower, no one was more dedicated, but when it came to missions, Karl wasn't quite ready to lead.

". . . Leaving the two of them alone was a mistake."

"Without a doubt."

It wasn't often that Solomon agreed with Anshel's regrets.

Karl was not the only one who looked to Diva as a peerless queen. There was no exception among Solomon and the other Chevaliers. The trouble with Karl was that he was too impulsive and uninhibited. Once Diva had discovered that they shared a love of practical jokes, they had gotten along almost too well. When he was told not to do something, she would goad him into doing it anyway.

Diva took advantage of his selfless nature.

Their weird master-and-servant relationship had led to these unforeseen results.

"Do you know where they are headed?"

"I have no idea."

The cracks in the glass wall made it look like the sky was broken. The strong wind coming in from the hole in the glass ruffled Solomon's blond locks, and he frowned.

As some point his brothers Nathan and James arrived.

Thirty minutes hadn't passed since they had been contacted, but when it came to Diva's safety—for James especially, but Nathan also—time was not wasted.

"Where is it they could have run off to?" Nathan straightened a fallen statue and let out a deep sigh. Yet his tone and expression implied he found the whole situation a little funny.

James, on the other hand, clearly could not see the humor. "This is what happens when Karl is left to his own devices. This will throw off our military strike planned for next month."

"That wasn't bad. Nice ad-libbing." As he caressed the hair of the doll he held, the tall theater director fluttered his long eyelashes at his brother.

"You're not any better."

"I'll be a good boy."

With little interest in returning his brother's affection, James turned toward the entrance, disgusted.

As James walked toward the door, Nathan called out to his uniformed back.

"Where are you going?"

"Nowhere I can say."

It likely had something to do with searching for Diva. Chiropterans had the ability to detect members of their own family, but they differed from individual to individual. Karl and Diva's abilities in this department were superior to James's, and unfortunately, they were already out of his range. Without the ability to sense them, finding them would be next to impossible.

"You can be so impatient sometimes."

Nathan's comment was both derogatory and complimentary, and neither he nor Solomon attempted to stop their brother.

They both knew there was nothing they could do to keep him here. Naturally, Solomon didn't plan to pass the time sitting and waiting for his return.

"For the time being, we'll get started on our search for Diva," he told Anshel.

"I will head your way now."

Chances were, he was already on the way, as Solomon could hear the sound of rubber tires squealing on asphalt in the background.

"What about your meeting with Professor Collins?"

"Let him wait. Nothing comes before Diva's safety."

It was the exact response Solomon had expected from his eldest brother. And he agreed completely.

"See you soon . . ." After hanging up, Solomon slipped his cell phone into the pocket inside his suit jacket.

Now the question was how to start the search . . .

He didn't think they would go into the city to satisfy their hunger indiscriminately on random humans, but with Karl as a traveling companion, anything could happen.

Fortunately, Diva had discriminating tastes. She wouldn't drink a drop from anyone she didn't really like.

She was used to those that she liked being whatever, whenever, and wherever she wanted. When they weren't, she got irritated.

"Maybe she found *something* that tickled her fancy."

Nathan used his long chin like an index finger and gestured toward the hole in the glass as he looked at the sky.

As they walked together toward the entrance, Solomon glanced at where Nathan was looking.

"What do you mean?"

"Like I said. *Something*."

His grin was only revealed in his lips, and he kissed the cheek of the doll he held to his chest.

+

The sudden gust of wind mussed up Riku's chestnut-colored hair.

"I wonder what happened, so suddenly."

"Huh?"

"What happened so that we had to return to the headquarters?" Riku screamed into his brother's ear so that his voice wouldn't be drowned out by the helicopter rotors over their heads.

"Who knows? Maybe they invited us to dinner."

Kai answered as loud as he could as they jogged across the heliport. He yelled even louder than Riku, maybe in an attempt to get David, who was a few steps ahead, to hear him.

The passengers on the private helicopter which had traveled from Paris to the gigantic luxury ship anchored at the port in Marseilles had been the two brothers, David, Louis, and Hagi.

"I wonder if Mao-san is angry . . ."

"I seriously doubt she isn't pissed."

Kai made it sound like he was annoyed by her, but since he had seen her for the first time at the apartment Riku had heard the affection in his voice.

Kai cared about other people.

Riku knew it firsthand.

It was just that he had a hard time showing it, especially when it was someone important to him, and especially when that person was nearby. That was why Kai usually chose action over words. That was how he showed people he cared.

Riku had a faint recollection of a fight with the Schiff on this heliport.

He had just awoken from his coma, and was barely conscious at the time. But he did remember getting injured in the battle, and he would never forget the sensation of drinking human blood for the very first time.

More than the taste or texture, what had the most impact was that it was as warm as Kai's body.

"Kai-niichan."

Riku grabbed Kai's hand as they entered the interior of the ship.

"What?!"

". . . Yeah."

It was an impulsive act. Riku had surprised himself, and he released his brother's hand. It was this warmth, like the heat from his chest, that rescued Riku from the pain.

"Yeah, here. Let's play catch later, OK?"

Looking down suspiciously, Kai saw Riku take out a softball and put it in Kai's hand. Kai couldn't help but laugh.

"Where in the world did you buy that?"

"At a souvenir shop at the Eiffel Tower. I figured if they took the trouble to stock it, then maybe I could play with Saya-neechan."

"With Saya?"

Different from the official baseballs, this soft-type ball was very similar to the ones Kai used to touch every day. That exact weight brought back memories, and he tossed it between his hands as he took the stairs down.

Saya should already have arrived at the ship by now. If her meeting with Joel was over, then she might have had some free time.

But Kai didn't have a pleasant look on his face.

"What's wrong?"

"Just, if she reads the diary, it's going to stir up a bunch of hard memories for her . . ."

Riku didn't know the details of the diary, but he knew Saya's history was full of many dark and difficult times. It might have been because he had become one of her Chevaliers, and he could sense these sorts of things now. Kai had already read the record of Saya's life, and that was where his concern came from.

"You always make that face when you are worried about Saya-neechan or me."

"No, I don't. It's just that I am you guys' big brother. That's all."

Even if Saya and Diva were sisters, and even if Riku was no longer human—Kai's feelings would never change.

"You know, you should talk out your feelings more."

If he had, he and Saya wouldn't have had such friction after Aurélien died. Riku was sure Saya felt the same way.

". . . You are getting wise for your young age, man."

Kai frowned shamefully for a moment, but in a failed effort to hold back a smile, revealed his white teeth.

Kai reached out his arm, like he usually did, and tousled Riku's hair. Kai then sprinted down the stairs to get away as Riku turned around.

"C'mon, I am still just a kid . . . I haven't changed."

"Me either!" With that quick response he threw a white ball that Riku tried to catch with both hands, but, flustered, he missed, and heard a dull thud as his legs gave way underneath him.

"Wha-?!"

Riku's hand missed the guardrail, but he fell into the arms of Hagi, who prevented him from tumbling backward onto the staircase landing.

"Th-thanks, Hagi."

Riku gave his thanks to the cellist as his eyes scanned the ground for the ball, but it had bounced down the stairs.

There must have been a short somewhere, as the lights along the walls began to blink out randomly.

"Hey! What the hell was that?"

"The sound of destruction."

Kai's critical question got a response from David, who finished his sentence by pulling out his pistol.

Kai's face went red.

"Not the Chiropterans?"

"I don't know yet. If we are under attack, the deck is not a safe place to be. Take refuge in the ship's hold. We'll hook up with Joel."

With a nod from Louis, David exited the stairwell landing into a ship corridor.

Riku was not able to see him off.

That *song* filled his ears.

"Hagi . . . can you hear it?"

"—Diva." Hagi's eyes turned toward the bow of the ship.

Joel immediately picked up his office telephone.

"What do we know?"

"There are two *guests*. They invaded through the bow and are now confirmed in sector N2."

"What about N1?"

"No response."

"Permission to use heavy artillery within headquarters granted. Retreat from N2 and shut all the surrounding barrier walls."

"But, if we are too loud, we will attract the attention of the police and the local harbor lowlifes."

"Contact the bridge and tell them to pull anchor and shove off. We won't attract any attention in the middle of the sea."

After several exchanges of information, the head of the Goldschmidt family set the receiver in its cradle and stood from his chair.

The warning sirens could be heard from this room, as well.

"It would be hard to believe this is just an accident. I'm sorry, Saya, but—"

"Yes. I understand."

She was already standing up.

Joel recognized the meaning of the red fire burning in her pupils.

The sound rattled her eardrums.

"... Diva."

Her song.

"Diva? You mean she came to this ship?" Joel's surprise was clear. Diva was important to Solomon and her other Chevaliers, and it was their job to protect her. It didn't make sense for her to be a part of an attack on this stronghold.

There was a good possibility she was doing this on her own.

Saya had seen, back at the Zoo, that nothing got in the way of Diva and her interests or desires. The Chevaliers were supposed

to grant her wishes, so they would probably have been unable to stop her.

Diva's desire—somewhere on this ship.

"Could this be the attack David talked about? But it's too early. Maybe telling us it would be a month later was a trick to make sure we weren't prepared."

"But I sense that none of Diva's Chevaliers are with her." Saya questioned Joel's logic as he proceeded to the neighboring room.

If they really had planned on sinking this floating fortress, they would have brought all their numbers. They had the ability to create an almost unlimited supply of Chiropterans.

"Something is strange. Mounting an attack like this all on her own does seem like a Diva-esque whim, though." Joel sped quickly through the door, carrying only his ancestor's diary and pocket watch.

Waiting in the next room were four agents wearing the same black suits David usually wore. They were all wearing sunglasses. They carried small machine guns and assault rifles.

"We're going to the conference room. David and the others should already be there."

"David-san? And the others?"

"Pardon me, Saya. I may have made a mistake." As they passed through the next room with the Red Shield agents, Joel's words hung in Saya's ears.

"Huh?"

"Your two brothers and David have arrived on the ship. They are the ones who decided to come back, but, if I had known this was going to happen, I would have sent them back to Paris."

"No . . . not at all." As they continued down a large corridor, Saya cast aside Joel's apologetic words.

Destructive booms rang from the far end of the ship through the interior corridor.

"Kai and Riku have come back for me. They will wait for me so that I can fight. After this is all over, the three of us will go back to Okinawa . . . at least that is my dream."

Having said it out loud, Saya felt a little embarrassed at her selfishness. "With all the people I have hurt along the way, I really don't know what I should be wishing for . . ."

"Something wonderful, of course." Joel made his declaration without slowing the pace of his feet. "Now you are fighting, aren't you? You fight without trying to escape your past. Once the battle is over, who can deny you your right to peace and quiet? If you are thinking it is your responsibility, you need to know the responsibility of what happens falls completely on the descendent of Joel and head of Red Shield. Me."

". . ."

It wasn't anything physical, but Saya felt like she saw true strength in the face of the young man.

He must have noticed she was looking at him, as his rigid expression quickly faded away.

"Don't forget it. Your family is hoping for your happiness. Their happiness depends on you getting back to them safely and in one piece."

". . . I know."

"Diva attacking the ship may seem like a bad thing, but actually, this gives us an incredible opportunity."

Saya nodded without saying a word.

"—Saya."

The pitch of the voice was so high, it sounded like it came from inside Saya's eardrums.

It wasn't a frequency humans could detect.

She had experienced this before, this voice vibrating with madness and delight.

"Joel-san!"

Her warning came too late.

The corridor wall suddenly peeled apart.

Showers of red sprayed across the corridor.

Three of the four guards that surrounded them were reduced to mincemeat in just moments, and their blood covered the passageway.

Saya jumped backward, seeing the walls covered with holes on one side; the other had countless red stakes sticking out of it.

This looked like Schiff . . .

They had intentionally crystallized parts of their bodies and fired them like a barrage of arrows.

Joel had fallen to the ground, but, thankfully, it appeared that he was breathing. However, the stakes piercing his back could not be ignored.

"Gwuua . . ."

"Chief!" The remaining young agent, soaked in blood, rose from the floor to help Joel, only to face the end of his short life.

In that moment, the hole-riddled wall completely broke apart, and pieces of metal scattered in all directions to reveal a large dark figure.

"They already made it this far in . . ."

With his comrades' blood dripping into his eyes, the guard calmly raised his machine gun, but before he could apply pressure from his finger to the trigger, his head had already been grasped by reptilian fingers.

The momentary silence was broken by the sound of a human head being crushed.

His body tightening in convulsions, the dead man gripped the trigger once again, only to have his corpse tossed aside by the beast. It turned its neck toward Saya.

The head looked to be a cross between an ancient ape and some kind of reptile, and its mouth seemed to form a grin around its uneven teeth.

"Aah. The lovely Saya. How I have dreamed of meeting you again . . ."

Saya took one step back and leaned down loosely. ". . . Karl Fei-Ong."

The Phantom of the thick forests of Vietnam.

So he was still alive.

But what did this mean? The arm and leg Saya had cut off were not artificial limbs, but living Chiropteran flesh.

"Ha ha! So you noticed? It was hard without an arm and a leg. Until I got new ones attached."

His grayish-brown arm rose up as if lifted by a string, its claws dripping blood.

"I may have new limbs, but my feelings for you haven't changed a bit. Shall we dance?"

Saya lowered her head and leapt forward. She spun horizontally across the ground picking up a survival knife that must

have belonged to one of the guards, and sliced through the monster's shin.

But that wasn't enough to harm the beast.

Splashing through the pool of blood and body parts, Saya stood on guard again. Karl turned around and Saya could see that the wound on his leg was already beginning to close.

Saya easily bent her body sideways to avoid the downward swing of his claws, which barely slid through her hair. She rolled her torso back while rotating the handle of the knife to an underhanded grip and plunged the blade into Karl's flank. Then everything went dark and Saya's body was jerked forward.

She was enveloped in a black shroud that was growing tighter and tighter.

She spread her legs and kicked her way out of the embrace of his membranelike wings. She fell face first toward the floor and cartwheeled away from the monster, avoiding his swinging heel.

Before Saya could prepare herself, Karl's giant frame was already closing in.

"Very impressive, Saya!" His cry was accompanied by a thrust with his right claw that Saya deflected with the knife.

But that was the last time the unfamiliar weapon would be any use to her.

". . . Urrk."

She frowned as her wrist went numb. What was left in her hand was the bottom half of the knife. She heard the sound of the blade clang against the corridor wall.

"This should put an end to it."

Karl slowly walked toward Saya and his right arm split open vertically.

Without spilling a drop of blood, something red began to reveal itself through the tear.

Seeing the spear-shaped protuberance grow from his arm, Saya lowered herself closer to the floor. She slowly tried to retreat, but Karl teasingly didn't allow the distance between them to grow.

"The song isn't over, and I am not finished. Show me. Show me how you dance!"

Flexing muscle and a sound like a bowstring snapping were followed by a red flash.

Before Saya could move, a loud boom filled the corridor.

From behind her, a dagger zipped by and nicked Karl's flying stake.

The deflected spear-tip was thrown off course and whizzed by Saya's face before stopping in the passage wall.

Saya turned around and saw a jet-black blur coming her way.

"Hagi!"

"... Bastard!"

Karl's menacing growl burned with jealousy of Saya's Chevalier.

Karl's eyes targeted Hagi, and he spread his great arms and began his rush toward him. His claws scraped along both walls and the ring was deafening. Industrial-sized sparks rained to the ground.

Just before he slammed into Hagi, Karl wrapped his arms around the young man, but Hagi slipped deftly away.

"Saya." Hagi tossed the katana he was holding in his left hand.

The moment Saya caught it Hagi and Karl began to brawl. Hagi had Karl by both arms, but because of the massive weight difference, Hagi was forced backward.

Hagi maintained his stance. The only thing keeping Karl from overpowering him could be heard in several blasts of gunfire.

". . . Too many onlookers spoiling the fun."

As Karl spat out his words, fountains of blood sprang from his shoulders.

The pressure loosened, giving Hagi an opening. He pulled Karl, instead of pushing him, throwing off his balance. Hagi swung the monster around in a half rotation and then kicked Karl in the neck, sending him back first into the wall. A spine-shaped dent remained in the wall.

"Louis, the Chief!"

"Roger!"

With his gun raised to his shoulder, David ran past Louis, who quickly rushed to help Joel.

"I'm fine . . . Protect Saya."

"Please, don't talk crazy."

Saya sensed anger in the voice of the usually collected Louis. He rotated the shotgun he carried to his back and, using both arms, lifted Joel by his armpits. The seriousness of Joel's injuries was instantly clear. The stakes sticking out of Joel's back may have not only broken bones, but could have conceivably hit internal organs.

"Saya, we have to pull out for now!" David shouted as he kept blasting his pistol, ensuring a path of retreat for Louis.

Saya snapped the scabbard, exposing the silver blade.

"Hagi and I will stop him. Hurry and take care of Joel!"

"... All right. We're counting on you."

David wasn't a man who liked exposing others to danger. When Saya fought Chiropterans, he had always put himself in harm's way, as well.

For David to abandon the fight showed how important Joel really was. David saw Joel as the personification of Red Shield.

Karl, on the other hand, seemed to have little interest in the humans.

"A quick exit for the bit players is an excellent idea."

Karl peeled his body from the wall as he spat words out like fire.

"Looks like one more got left behind."

His eyes met Hagi's as Saya's Chevalier set his cello case on the floor with his right hand over his chest. The white bandage covering his hand fell loose, unwinding as it streamed to the ground.

Saya moved to sandwich Karl between her and Hagi.

After she was sure David and all the other agents had turned the corner toward the elevators, she turned to Karl.

"Where's Diva?"

She felt her sister's presence on the ship. But she wasn't able to hone in on her as clearly as she had a few moments earlier.

"She is not your partner today. I am your partner!"

Karl turned around. His winged right arm had turned into a sharp blade that cut a slice through the corridor wall.

Saya ducked to avoid his swing, and his arm continued over her head. He took a step back and, in what appeared to be a taunt, leaned over and bowed to her.

"So, are you finally in the mood to dance?"

"..."

It was strange.

As her big sister, Saya should have been the attraction for Diva, who was somewhere on this ship. If Diva's goal was to destroy Red Shield, then she would have been after its most powerful member, Joel, and should have been here, in this part of the ship's depths. But the only one here was her Chevalier.

A bad feeling washed over Saya.

They needed to find Diva as fast as they could . . .

To do so, they needed to defeat Karl. Saya raised her katana in front of her at the same moment she saw Hagi move.

Karl was so focused on Saya that, for a moment, he forgot about Hagi behind him.

The monster swung around, just nicking Hagi's chest with his claws, while Hagi plunged his sword-shaped right arm deep into the creature's abdomen.

"You . . ."

With Hagi's beastly blade still stuck in his belly, Karl grabbed Hagi by the shoulders. His sharp claws pierced Hagi's flesh through to his back.

Blood trickled down the intertwined bodies, unable to separate from each other as they gouged deeper. Their legs shook, and the floor began to creak.

"Saya! Please go!"

Hagi spoke without letting his eyes move from Karl's face.

As nimble as a butterfly, Saya picked her scabbard up off the ground and slid her katana inside. There was no time to

hesitate, and wasting time would have implied she didn't trust his judgment.

"Got it. I'll leave this to you."

Saya ran past Hagi and Karl toward the elevators.

"Sayaaa!" Karl's frantic and resentful cry hit Saya in the back.

There were four elevator doors lined up in a row.

Of those, two were moving. According to the readout above the doors, both were traveling down below this floor. One of them was being ridden by David and the other Red Shield members. The infirmary was next to the residential section, so it wasn't likely they would be stopping at any other floors.

The other elevator appeared to be going even lower, to the storerooms.

"..."

Saya pressed the down button, calling an elevator.

The monotonous sound of the alarms made her heart beat faster.

The elevator dropped lower and lower through the body of the ship.

As Riku kept an eye on the floor indicator above the door, he glanced at his surroundings.

Naturally he was in a rectangular box about three meters high. There was nothing particularly different about this elevator, but he couldn't make himself feel comfortable. Even inside the elevator he could hear the warning sirens.

"Hey, Riku. Are you scared?"

"N-no."

After being poked by his brother in the shoulder, only to turn and see his sadistic smile, Riku couldn't help but feel discouraged.

There was a firefight with the Chiropterans happening on this ship. Saying it wasn't scary would be a lie, but this was Kai who was asking. On top of that they were accompanied by two machine-gun carrying, black-suited agents. Riku had a right to be worried, but there was no reason to be panicked.

"It's just, something . . ." Riku couldn't shake the feeling that someone was watching him.

"Don't worry. The safest place is on the bottom of a ship. Unless, of course, the ship is sinking."

"That's not funny." Kai's mouth bent at the agent's words, and he pulled back the slide of his pistol.

It was the report from the wireless radios each of the agents wore that must have gotten Kai nervous.

"—No word from N2 to L2. We have confirmed that one of the invaders is in a confrontation with the cellist. The other is lost on N2. Be on careful watch."

The cellist had to be Hagi. Saya must have been there, too.

Riku wanted to be at Saya's side.

That feeling rose in Riku's heart once again. The feeling that they were family and he wanted to be with his sister had faded, and the feeling that he existed to protect her burned in his heart.

"Saya-neechan . . ."

He was very conscious of the fact it was her blood that traveled through his veins, and he squeezed his hands at his chest.

He closed his eyes to feel Saya.

Riku couldn't be with her at that moment, but he was unable to curb the desire to help her. If he could put his wish into a physical form, if he could be Saya's shield . . .

In his mind, he saw Saya. She was smiling.

—*Where are you?*

She looked up at him in the darkness.

Her eyes were blue like the moon.

—*Hey, where are you?*

The voice was faint, but he could definitely hear it in his ears.

Riku opened his eyes and his spine stiffened.

Confused, Riku looked around to see he was in the elevator with Kai and two Red Shield guards. Besides them, there were no other people around.

". . . Who are you?"

Without thinking he responded out loud, and he quickly heard a suppressed giggle tickling his earlobes.

—*There you are.*

She had found him.

Riku felt a wave of dread wash over his body.

"What's wrong?"

Kai turned from the blinking floor indicator above the door and looked at him.

"No- nothing." Riku shook his head. If he said too much, she would really appear. That was Riku's fear.

—*Almost there.*

The voice fluttered in his ears like a tropical butterfly, and Riku took a step closer to the elevator door. He wanted out of this box as soon as possible.

A chime rang, and the elevator stopped.

"From here we'll transfer to a freight elevator."

Just as the agent finished his sentence, the metal doors of the elevator split open.

The gap between the doors slowly widened.

The hall was dark, probably because of the state of emergency. The alarms suddenly got louder.

But Riku couldn't hear them.

It was because a girl was standing there waiting for them.

"I found you!"

Riku looked up at the sticky sweet smile on the girl's pretty face.

"Saya . . . ?"

No. It wasn't her.

Riku immediately knew that Kai's guess was wrong.

This girl wasn't Saya. Those eyes . . . as blue as the sky . . . "Diva?"

Their two escorts quickly raised the barrels of their guns.

The shots sounded like explosions echoing off the floor and walls of the elevator.

Empty cartridges bounced across the floor like a swarm of insects.

"Hurry! Go up!"

"No, no, no." Kai reached for the floor buttons on the wall, but his movements were suddenly halted.

The girl that had been in the corridor a moment before now covered the buttons with her hand as she laughed cruelly.

The agents had stopped shooting.

They turned around, in search of the target that had somehow slipped by them.

"Get out!"

The first to react to the rebuke of the black-clad agents was Kai.

The shell-shocked Riku felt his older brother grab him by the arm and pull him from the elevator.

"Go on ahead!"

The two agents turned their guns to the interior of the elevator in order to buy time for the boys' retreat.

Kai was already running down the corridor, dragging Riku, as he looked over his shoulder at the scene behind them. What little he could see of the interior of the elevator reflected the orange flashes of heavy gunfire.

Even the most nimble creature in the world couldn't escape gunfire at such a close range in such a small space.

But Riku saw something just as they turned the corner in the hallway.

On this side of the men blasting constant fire into the elevator appeared a girl in an elegant dress.

The sounds of the gunfire stopped right after that.

Joel's wounds were deep, and surgical procedures would require some time.

The medical facilities on the ship were equal to those of a large hospital in any developed nation, but the situation didn't allow for a lengthy operation. Due to the invasion by Diva and her Chevalier, nearly thirty percent of the ship had been violated.

"E4 is silent . . . There is not only serious structural damage, but heavy human losses."

Louis grumbled as he took in information on his laptop and from the wireless on the ship's condition, section by section.

Even though they weren't prepared for this attack, Louis hadn't expected this level of penetration and damage from Diva and a single Chevalier.

"What do we do, David?"

". . . Do you know where Saya is now?" David looked at the airtight operating-room door, and answered Louis's request with a question.

With his laptop resting on the sofa cushion, Louis remained kneeling on the floor as he punched keys on the keyboard.

"I found her on the surveillance cameras. She is in an elevator right now. She's on the move as Hagi deals with the Chevalier. Diva is . . . still nowhere to be found."

"I see."

David opened the cylinder of his trusted pistol and made sure it was loaded.

"What are you going to do?" Louis asked.

"Saya is most likely tracking Diva. Keep her in your sights."

"I am asking what *you* are doing."

"I am going to assemble our soldiers to go protect her."

David pulled a wireless receiver from his breast pocket and pressed it into his ear.

With this, he and Louis could communicate with each other.

"What will you do when you get there? With Joel incapacitated, you are the boss now." Louis stood up and lifted his shotgun. "The front line is not for the highest ranks."

"No. You stay here, close to Joel."

Just as David gave that order, the door to the operating room slid open.

The doctor tossed his gloves down the hazmat chute and his face stiffened when he saw he was being stared at.

"Well?"

"To be frank, not good. It would be much better if he would take a doctor's advice."

"What do you mean?"

David got his answer when the wheeled operating table was pushed out of the surgical room by the nurses.

Joel was lying on the bed, but his eyes were alert and he spotted David.

"Joel!"

"He refused a general anesthetic. Injuries of this severity cannot be operated on with just local anesthetics."

David went to Joel's side without listening to the doctor's words.

"Don't be insane. Hurry and let the doctors take care of you . . ."

"Not yet . . . I can't sleep now."

Joel answered in between deep breaths. His oxygen mask clouded at every interval.

"David . . . request help from the local . . . national coast guards . . . and navy forces."

David shivered when he put Joel's whispered message together. "You don't mean . . ."

"This ship will be . . . Diva's casket."

No further explanation was necessary.

No one in the room, including the doctors, nurses, assembled soldiers, or even Louis, could say a word. Their faces were frozen.

"Understood." It was David who broke the silence.

This ship was the cornerstone of Red Shield. This was their home base for communication and action. Their "shield." There was nowhere else. And now they were going to throw it away.

"Enact Code D in five minutes. Follow Manual C—all hands abandon ship."

"Roger."

Louis informed all members on the ship by the wireless of a maximum-priority communication.

Whether they were combatant or non-combatant members of Red Shield, all would abandon their posts and head to the lifeboats within a five-minute window.

Ten minutes after that, the ship would begin to sink.

After dropping down the emergency stairwell, they suddenly found themselves in a dark and gloomy space. It looked like the storeroom where Riku and the others had been forced to stay the very first time they boarded this ship. There were pipes and ducts out in the open, unlike the upper-class cabins in the decks above.

"Did we lose her?"

"Yeah . . ."

They both had their backs to the wall as they whispered to each other.

The girl with Saya's face—she was called Diva. David and Joel were fighting to kill her. Saya and Hagi had crossed swords with her long, long ago.

It was hard to remember, but Riku was pretty sure he had crossed paths with her at the ruins in the Zoo.

The girl with the beautiful voice, who sung as naturally as she killed . . .

An ill feeling of disgust flowed through Riku's body, and there were no words to describe the heaviness in his chest.

So this was what true sorrow felt like. Maybe if he had met Diva under different circumstances they could have become friends. But reality was something different.

If she was Saya's enemy, then she was Riku's enemy, too.

"Kai-niichan."

"What?"

"Are we gonna have to fight like this forever?"

". . . Yeah . . . maybe."

Riku asked his question out of the blue, but Kai's response took longer than he had expected.

Thinking about it, Riku had never really used the word "fight" before. He didn't even like competing academically with his classmates at school. No one ever got hurt by reading books or playing video games in their free time.

George had fought in a war.

Kai had fought on the baseball diamond.

In war, you take the soul of your enemy, and even in sports the goal is to defeat the other team. The two of them surely had no fear of pain, or of causing pain, in their fights.

The pain and injuries came with a purpose. That must be what it was.

Riku had a purpose, too.

He would fight to protect Saya. That was the way of the Chevalier.

Riku's sweaty palms tightened into fists.

"I need to learn how to fight."

"No you don't."

Kai answered without looking at Riku. Kai often answered questions coolly without really thinking, and Riku gazed at his profile.

"Why?"

"I'll protect you."

"*You* will?"

"Yeah."

His voice didn't have the confidence that his words implied.

What his older brother had struggled with when George had died, and when Saya had run away from the fight, was the fact that he didn't have the power to fight against Chiropterans. This was Riku's impression.

Kai had always wished for the power to protect his family.

If only Kai could transfer Hagi's strength to his own body and fight . . .

The irony was that the one who had received the body of a Chevalier wasn't Kai, but Riku. Even without Hagi's superhuman abilities, the fact that Riku was now practically immortal was incredible on its own.

"Aren't I Saya-neechan's Chevalier?"

"But before that, you are our little brother." Kai's attempt to dodge the question was assisted by an electronic sound.

It was a cell phone ringing.

Flustered, Kai opened the phone and put it to his ear.

"What? Oh, David? Don't surprise me like that. Right now we're . . ."

Kai's angry tone suddenly took a dramatic turn. ". . . Code D? . . . Sink? This ship?! What're you . . . Hey!"

It sounded like the connection had been cut.

"Dammit. We're out of range."

Kai tried to call him back several times, but with no luck.

It was likely that since the ship had traveled so far from the harbor they were no longer able to get phone reception. There were no cell-phone towers in the middle of the sea.

"What did David say?"

"He said this ship was going to sink, and that we needed to get up to the heliport."

"The ship is sinking?"

The answer to Riku's question came not from Kai but from an announcement in English over the ship's intercom.

"We are in a state of emergency. All aboard must evacuate within the next ten minutes. Self-destruct procedures have been enacted. I repeat. We are in a state of—"

Kai groaned as he looked up at the ceiling in search of the source of the voice. "This is not a joke. They are seriously going to sink it."

"Wha-what're we going to do? . . . We need to get out of here." Riku looked up at his brother desperately. He couldn't restrain his terror.

For a brief moment, Kai was deep in thought, and then he pulled the pistol from his belt.

"We need to get back to the upper deck, but I want you to forgive me if we run into *her*."

"—How ruuude."

Riku's body froze at the sound of the girl's voice reverberating through the ship's hatch.

"And I've been trying so hard to keep up with you. Well, actually, hide-and-seek is pretty fun." Her sinister laugh rained down throughout the storage hatch.

It was coming from above some freight in the loading area.

How long had she been there? Kneeling, she looked down at them over the side of the great wood box, revealing her ice-blue eyes.

"Riku! Go!" Kai raised the pistol with both hands, but for a moment, he was confused.

There was nobody at the other end of his muzzle.

"You're in my way."

It was a mirage. The voice from behind Kai came faster than he could turn around, and the light touch of her hand on his back sent him flying.

Kai's body tumbled through the air like a doll's.

"Gya . . . !"

He soared in a perfectly straight line into the wall, and blood spurted from his mouth on impact.

His body slumped to the floor and it was clear that he wasn't able to stand. He expelled mouthful after mouthful of blood from lungs pierced by broken ribs.

"Kai-niichan . . . !" He couldn't say anything more. Riku's legs felt funny, and all the way to the top of his head he felt like he had turned to plastic or something.

. . . What do I do? . . . What do I do? . . . What do I do? . . .

This was the only thought filling Riku's brain. He couldn't

move as he asked himself the question over and over, dread filling every vein in his body. The girl turned and looked at him.

Her scarlet lips formed a smile which traveled up her waxen cheeks.

"I came here looking for you."

Her voice was beautiful, like birds chirping.

But Riku was transfixed not by her voice, but by her eyes.

They were like spheres of blue flame.

They were the sure and unwavering eyes of an animal . . .

Otherwise, she looked exactly like Saya. Only those eyes gave her away.

"Riku . . ."

The anguish in Kai's voice broke Diva's spell.

Riku shook himself awake and took a step backward.

"G-get . . . away . . ."

Yet, Riku was unable to follow his brother's orders.

He couldn't let Kai die. How could he leave his brother here and run away?

"I must . . . !"

His knees shook as if they had been sliced with blades.

"I must do what I can . . . I must help my brother . . . !"

He felt as strongly about protecting Kai as he did about protecting Saya. He searched for the strength he saw Hagi exhibit every time he helped Saya. It was decided. To help Kai, he had to fight.

"Oh ho ho ho . . ."

One step at a time, Diva came closer and closer, her lips leaking an incessant giggle.

She smelled pungently sweet, like nectar.

She untied the ribbon at her collar and with both hands began unbuttoning the front of her dress.

The silk material slid slowly off her smooth shoulders to the floor to reveal her curvaceous female form.

It was like a pupa emerging from its cocoon as a butterfly.

Against the ship's hull Diva's naked white skin appeared to radiate a soft light.

Riku blinked rapidly to clear the sweat dripping in his eyes, but did not avert his gaze.

It wasn't fear, but a different feeling that kept his eyes from straying from hers.

I must fight . . .

What he had felt so strongly a moment ago was quickly fading into a distant memory.

He felt a maddening desire swell through him—it felt like a sense of duty—toward this girl, the queen of the Chiropterans.

Diva's fingers lightly stroked Riku's cheek.

Riku trembled with emotion, but his expression didn't change. Kai. Saya. Hagi. And George. All the things from his past. He would never be able to laugh or cry about them.

It was Riku's body that Diva was after.

Faithful to his instincts, Riku accepted the kiss from his bride.

Her warm tongue slipped between his teeth, and, like a little curious animal, explored the inside of his mouth.

The wireless radio she picked up off the dead agents told her of the sudden change of plans.

"Saya? Where are you?"

"I just switched to the freight elevator and am headed toward the ship's hold."

As she responded to Louis's question, Saya found herself growing irritated with the slow descent.

Something felt wrong.

It was not a faint premonition, but a heavy ball growing inside her chest. The feeling was so strong she looked at her hand gripping the scabbard of her katana with doubt.

"Joel ordered Code D. The ship is going to start to sink in ten minutes."

"This ship?! You mean sink to the bottom of the ocean?"

Saya was shocked by his words. This base was vital to Red Shield's operations.

"It isn't too good to be used for Diva's tomb. That's Joel's way of thinking. Saya, get to the heliport, now. If you push the button you can be back up in about one minute."

"What about Kai and Riku . . . ?"

She was also worried about Hagi, whom she had last seen fighting Karl, but no matter what the situation, he always had a way of taking care of himself.

"David just talked to them on the phone. They must have heard the warnings, too, so I am sure they are on their way here. If they aren't here in three minutes, David and I will go look for them."

"All right. Thank you."

Having Louis and David leave the heliport again wasn't the most efficient way of doing things, but Louis understood that Saya needed to focus on Diva.

Regardless, she was going to battle her sister somewhere. That, she felt sure of.

"You hurry up!"

"... OK."

The elevator stopped just as the radio clicked off.

As the doors slid open, Saya's breath caught in her throat.

The heavy, tepid air rubbed her face. The breeze coming from the outside was enough to rustle her hair.

Then she saw them..

"Oho, Nee-sama has arrived."

Diva, who was leaning over something on the ground, swiveled around to look at her.

Saya ignored her.

What Saya was focused on was the blue tone of Kai's face as his head lay in Diva's arms.

His eyes were barely open, but he slowly turned his head.

"Saya . . ."

The moment she heard his voice, Saya screamed.

There were no words, but an emotional cry of anger that was enough to rattle the hull of the ship.

"I don't want you to become angry. I haven't done anything to *him* yet. I was just about to feed him my blood, though—" As Diva stood up, her explanation was interrupted.

A sudden gust whipped through her long hair.

The distance of about ten meters meant nothing as Saya disappeared from Diva's field of vision.

Diva looked down at her chest to see it had been pierced through with the white blade of a sword, and its tip had thrust out her back.

"—Oho." Her cheerful voice dripped blood. "Magnificent, Saya-neesama."

Saya's eyes scorched with crimson as she glared at her sister's ecstatic smile.

Diva lifted both hands and placed them on Saya's shoulders.

"You are so careless. If you had leaked your blood on the blade, you could have killed your beloved sister."

Her willowy arms lifted Saya up as if she were weightless and with a light toss, threw her straight back into a stack of containers piled up along the ship's hull.

"Ooh . . ."

The metal boxes bent like soft candy before crashing down to the floor, and Saya quickly grabbed one to lift herself up when something stopped her. She noticed a figure lying next to her.

She hadn't been aware of his presence until now, because he wasn't breathing.

Now Saya understood what that heavy weight in her chest while she rode in the elevator had meant.

". . . Riku?"

It was a lump of stone in the shape of her brother.

The naked and pale, crystallized body of Riku had been dumped here.

A sound like ice cracking rang out, and fissures began to run through her brother's face.

Little pieces broke off. One hit the tip of Saya's finger.

Pain.

It barely touched her, but it hurt enough to make her cry.

It was Riku's pain.

"I received something very special from that boy. So I gave him my blood out of gratitude."

The pain in her finger and Diva's words striking her back told Saya that this was not a dream.

If Diva's blood entered the body of Saya's Chevaliers, this was what would happen . . . It was the way Chiropterans died, an event she had seen countless times.

"Now I understand. I understand how you felt when you killed my Chevalier . . . It feels really nice . . ." Diva let out a deep breath, and then mockingly put her fingers over her lips.

Her body suddenly sprung back as if shot by bow.

Her afterimage traveled backward in a horizontal path, but the katana that bisected her remained, pushed out at the corner of a container.

". . . Divaaa!" Saya stood up and turned her head, and murder in her eyes, struck out at her sister.

The fire in her pupils swelled.

Drunk with bloodlust, Diva's eyes narrowed and she raised her chin ever so slightly. She let out a pleased sigh as she readied her escape.

"—Karl, you may do whatever you wish with Neesama."

Her offer was followed by a vibration like an electric shock rattling the walls, and a voice dripping with joy.

"With pleasure—!"

Saya sprinted straight at Diva, but she had already moved.

"Urk!"

At the same time, the steel rigging in the ceiling swelled like a pregnant woman's belly before her water bursts. Cut wires fell to the hold's floor and a large mass came hurtling down.

Saya deftly bounced between the pipes and iron poles cast onto the floor, but she needed to constantly change direction. Tracking her movements in waves, red stakes marked each spot she had occupied a moment earlier. Saya dodged the giant needles that pursued her like a jilted lover before jumping back in a giant arc.

In order to keep Kai out of harm's way, she needed to get Diva away from him.

Unfortunately, it was easy for the enemy to interpret her intentions.

"Are you still taking care of that human?" Karl stepped out of the darkness, revealing his giant frame, and then pointed his spear-tipped right arm away from Saya.

He was aiming at Kai.

The moment Saya realized this, she was already in a sprint.

"This is how much I care about you." Karl's impassioned cry overlapped with the sound of a stretched bowstring being released.

As Saya ran toward Karl, she was able to raise her katana just in time to divert Karl's stakelike projectile.

The air lit up with massive sparks, and the spear was cut in two and sent spinning back.

"Hya . . . !"

She lost the sensation of the sword's grip between her fingers, and Saya's body bent backward.

She wouldn't be able to stop the next attack. If his aim was true, Kai would be killed.

The monstrosity that was Karl spoke in a sadistic growl. "Show me. I want to see your beautiful sad dance."

From the end of his beastly arm he released another spike.

She couldn't allow Kai's body to take any more injuries.

Saya stepped in the way of the missile and prepared to catch it in her chest.

Blood sprayed her clothes and cheeks.

But the blood was not her own.

"You . . . again?! You are ruining the dance!" Karl's abuse was directed at the young man dressed head to toe in black who had appeared just in front of her.

Karl's spearhead had pierced Hagi's left shoulder and blood soaked the hole in his jacket.

"Hagi . . ."

His long black hair scattered across his pale cheeks as Saya's Chevalier stared straight at Karl.

"Are you hurt, Saya?" he asked with his back still to her, and Saya hesitated before she answered. The words didn't come easily.

". . . I'm not . . . but Kai and Riku . . ."

Kai was still breathing. He had broken several bones, he was feverish and barely conscious, but his injuries were not life threatening.

But, Riku . . .

Hagi quickly glanced to the containers and saw the remains of the young boy.

". . ."

Saya couldn't see from where she stood, but she didn't expect Hagi's face would show any signs of grief. She could see his pain and anger in the blood that dripped off the knuckles of his tightened fists. This was more real than any words or tears.

He had been connected to Riku in a different way than his connection to Kai. Hagi and Riku were family.

In his heart, Hagi felt as strongly about his "little brother" being killed as Saya and Kai would.

His right arm reached up and gripped the stake lodged in his shoulder. He gritted his teeth in silence, not from the pain of the misshapen spike, but from pure anger.

Hagi slowly pulled the stake out, and the open wound soon overflowed with blood, which splashed down onto the floor.

"Tee hee hee."

Diva's sweet laugh didn't match the gruesome spectacle unfolding before her.

"Karl, close the curtain on your performance. I'm watching, you know." Diva sat high on top of a stack of containers, where she had a commanding view of the storeroom. Her faithful knight responded by jumping to immediate action.

As he raised a steel arm, Karl dashed straight toward Hagi.

Hagi was able to thwart his attack with one arm.

Considering their difference in body weights, Hagi should have been blown backward. Perhaps Karl had intended to stop.

The claws of his feet dug into the metal floor and he spat out his hatred. "You mutt bastard! No one comes between Saya and me!"

Hagi's fingers interlocked with Karl's right arm, and Karl fired a red stake through Hagi's right palm.

However, Hagi showed complete indifference. He didn't seem to notice the spike sticking out the back of his hand as he tightened his grip.

"Da-damn you . . ." Karl's panicked cry was followed by a bizarre cracking sound as Hagi's fingers crushed the bones of Karl's hand.

"Uhgh . . . You peon—"

Karl tried to strike Hagi's face with his other arm, but instead found his chest impaled and his head tossed backward.

What pierced Karl's heart was the transformed arm of Hagi, which only seconds earlier had been struck by Karl's spike.

"Grrrsh . . . !"

Wave after wave of blood poured from Karl's mouth, yet he managed to shove Hagi away. However, Hagi used that momentum to pull out his arm and toss Karl's oversized body to the floor. From atop her perch Diva's smile bent into a scowl.

"What kind of sloppiness is that? Are you sure you are really my Chevalier?"

Karl slowly stood up, his head hanging low in response to his mistress's comments.

"I like him better than you." As Diva kicked her bare heels against the container, she gave a wide smile to Hagi before her attention was quickly pulled elsewhere.

Saya followed Diva's gaze and saw the elevator doors open, revealing two men.

David and Louis.

Even before the doors were completely open, David was firing his pistol.

Unfortunately, as sparks fell from the containers above, Diva had already made her way to the hold floor.

"Louis. Give me cover."

"Got it!"

As Louis fired a grenade from his assault rifle, David ducked down and ran forward.

The shell was aimed at Diva, and Karl dove toward it sideways, arms crossed in front of his chest. The tiny warhead exploded on impact, creating a giant cloud of smoke within the ship's storeroom.

"Saya, you all right?"

"David . . . how did you . . . ?"

They were supposed to be waiting at the heliport. What had brought them all the way down here? By her mental clock, the time was up and the ship should be sinking by now.

"I made a promise to George. I couldn't leave all of you behind."

". . ."

David glanced down at Kai, whose body Saya was supporting in her arms on the floor. He put two fingers to Kai's neck and then proceeded to lift the boy into his own arms.

"There's no time. We have to move. Where's Riku?"

"Riku is . . ." The words wouldn't come out.

But David understood the meaning behind her silence.

David clenched his teeth and punched the floor with his left fist.

Surprised, Saya lifted her head.

It was clear from the look on his face that he was disappointed in his own lack of power. As he pounded his hand into the floor once, twice, and then a third time, blood flowed down from his knuckles.

". . . Excuse me," was all David could muster as he lifted his body up from his knees.

His face had returned to stone.

"Run to the elevator."

Without uttering a word, Saya followed his direction. Hagi followed behind her.

As Louis backed up toward the elevator, he continued his grenade assault unperturbed by the debris falling from the rafters.

Saya could see Kai's face as he was carried through the smoke by David.

She wanted to get a good look at his face.

It was the last time she expected to see it.

"Door's closing. Hurry up!" Louis shouted as he fired randomly over their heads and held the elevator door open with his hip.

Kai was carried into the elevator on David's shoulder and set down. He did what he could to turn and see what was going on. His half-conscious state dulled the pain of his broken bones.

"Riku . . ."

Irritated by his own sluggish movements, Kai peered into the smoke-filled hold.

Where was Riku?

There was no leaving without his brother . . .

They were supposed to go back to Okinawa and reopen their father's restaurant.

Riku was much more meticulous about cooking than Kai.

Kai didn't have sensitive taste buds, so Riku would have to show him how to cook.

That would be fine.

He would have Saya be the taste tester. Since she was always hungry, she would be happy to have a bite of something any time. On the other hand, she would say that everything tasted delicious.

His father used to say it was never a waste of time to exercise your talents. But father had made Saya who she was, so that's why she had loved everything he cooked.

I will make food that will put a smile on Saya's face.

Riku and me together . . .

—As Kai slowly transitioned back into unconsciousness, his eyes caught a glimpse of his brother. Riku was sprawled on his back behind a container, facing the elevator.

His face was white. His eyes showed no feeling.

"Riku . . . What're you doing? . . . We're leaving."

Kai tried to laugh, but his muscles wouldn't cooperate.

"Hey! Riku . . ."

He reached out his hand.

Steel framework fell from the ceiling, crushing Riku's skull.

Not a drop of blood spilled out.

Instead, the area was scattered with what looked like shards of broken gems.

The distance was far and Kai couldn't see clearly. After that, all hell broke loose around him, but Kai absorbed that moment with all five of his senses.

". . . Kai."

His eyes were fixated on the destruction of his brother's body, yet he gradually comprehended the silhouette of Saya standing before him.

"Kai, I'm sorry."

Saya softly grasped his hand, which was still reaching into the air, with two palms and laid it to rest.

She let go, but left something small and hard in his hand.

"Saya . . . ?"

Saya took a step back and looked up at David.

"Go ahead and close the door."

David's face didn't move. He wasn't so thick as to not recognize the meaning of her words. He just coolly acted as if he weren't completely aware of what was going on.

". . . Get on. There's no time."

"We'll stay here. If Diva escapes, there will have been no point in sinking the ship." The tall man with black hair and a cello case strapped to his back stood close to Saya.

With flames and black smoke rising behind them, Saya and Hagi looked surprisingly serene. Saya looked at Kai and gave him a reassuring grin.

But it was a very sad-looking smile. It wasn't the expression he wanted to see on Saya's face.

"Our fate was decided the moment we were born. David-san, Louis-san, please take care of Kai."

David's silent hesitation was cut short.

"All right." With those words, Louis gave Saya a wink.

Without another word, he pressed the button to shut the doors.

Kai could neither stop them nor protest. As the doors closed, hiding the figure of his sister, Kai reached his right arm out.

"Saya—Saya—!"

David was still kneeling on the ground and hustled to prevent Kai from moving. The fingers of the hand that grabbed Kai's left arm were shaking.

"Let me go . . . Saya can't . . . Saya!"

No.

This can't happen.

It was just like when he had lost George in Okinawa. He couldn't lose his only remaining family, Saya and Riku, all at once.

". . . Sayaaa!"

There was no response from her, save for a faint smile.

It was sorrowful, and apologetic.

The doors closed all the way.

The elevator began its slow ascent.

David still held onto Kai's arm. He inadvertently gripped it so tightly that the pain almost made Kai lose consciousness. It was like he was in a borrowed body.

Kai became aware of something in his hand.

It was what Saya had placed in Kai's palm.

He opened his fingers to see a piece of red crystal brightly illuminated under the florescent lights in the ceiling.

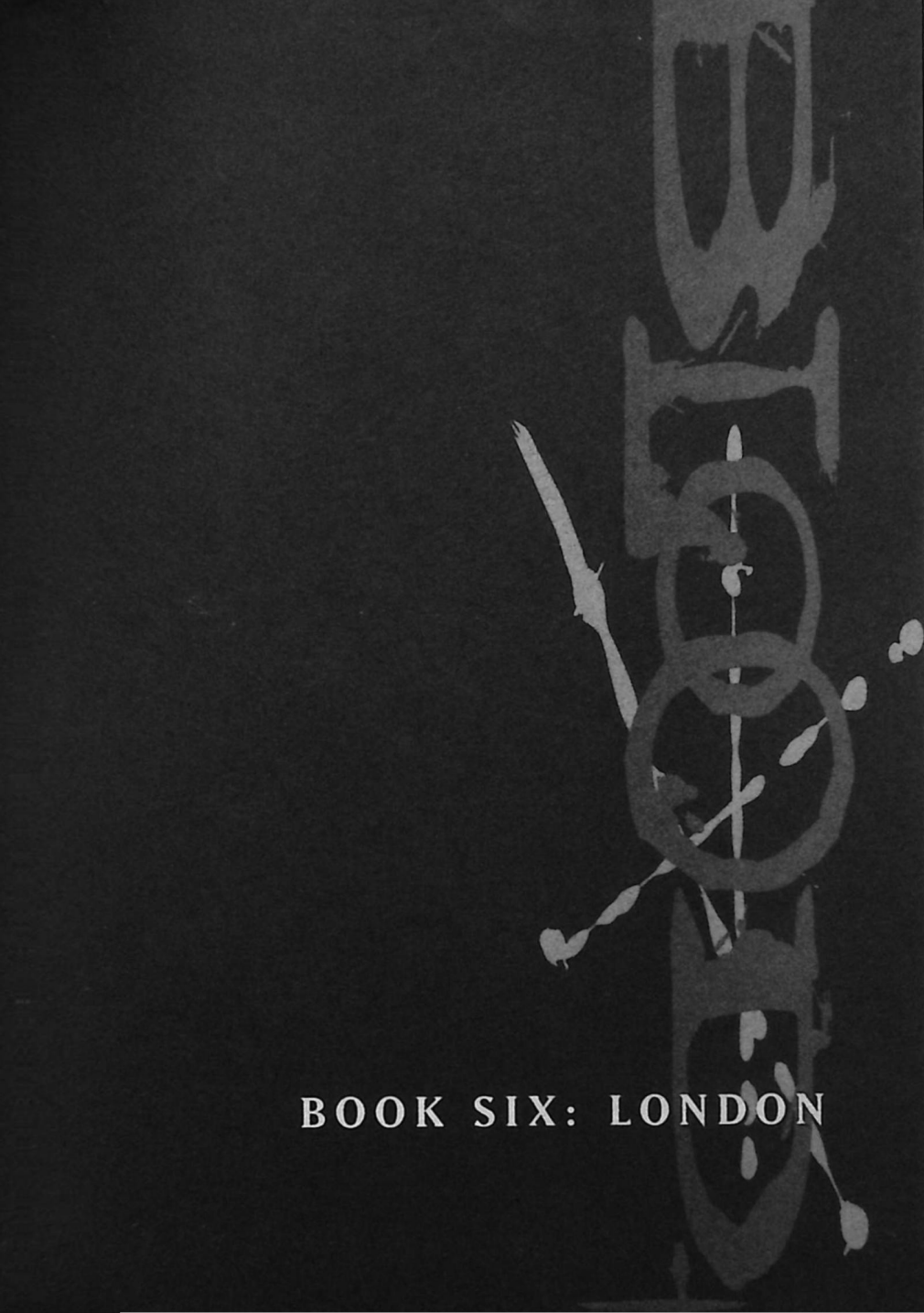
It was Riku.

". . ."

He held it with both hands, and banged his head against the elevator door.

Kai's tears began to flow.

The hull of the ship rumbled from an explosion. But inside the elevator, no one said a word.



BOOK SIX: LONDON

01

A THUNDEROUS ROAR echoed through the plumbing system, and for a moment the lights flickered.

Just as Louis had warned, it appeared to be a specialized attack intended to create disorder for the enemy.

". . . It's for real." Kai's sunglasses slid down his nose as he spoke with wonder.

Even if the Special Air Service was a branch of the military, it wasn't an extension of the police like SWAT, but a military elite. Antiterror, antiguerrilla, they were a special platoon endowed with superior abilities.

As they moved toward their objective, a series of gunshots rang out.

Even Red Shield had never seen this level of expertise.

However, their target was far from easy.

SAS had a perfect record with human opponents, but the same couldn't be said for their run-ins with non-human enemies. When information could be collected in advance, countermeasures could be constructed, but SAS had no idea that their enemies were anything more than run-of-the-mill terrorists.

The SAS had gained its reputation from years of fighting with the IRA, a conflict based on blood and religion, and it was the authority on counterterror action. Would it be so strange to think they might have had experience with an enemy that couldn't be killed with guns?

The perfectly executed gunshots suddenly grew disorderly.

The cry of a monster, loud enough to shake one's insides, drowned out the sound of gunfire.

"Didn't work."

The Red Shield fighters would have stood their ground and focused their gunfire toward the monster's head. Using rockets or heavy explosives on beasts that could regenerate themselves, but SAS wouldn't know to do that. In addition, under these geographical conditions, large-scale weapons were not an option.

Kai prayed for their safe return, as he walked away through the sewers.

He walked several city blocks through the humid, pungent air. Finding an iron ladder, he went up and pushed open a manhole to let himself out.

It was an area the police didn't patrol.

Feigning innocence, Kai slipped into the nighttime London scenery.

If the SAS members taking care of a Chiropteran cleanup in the underground had been here now, watching Kai walk away, they definitely would have wanted a word with him.

A boy—though his looks were strikingly fearless—walking and carrying his body the way he did would have attracted attention from anyone looking out for suspicious activity.

It was clear he was a well-trained fighter with combat experience.

However, this street was full of suit-wearing men and women happily leaving their offices and students also heading home. There were blue-collar workers and old ladies with their toy poodles. Even the Scottish policemen didn't take notice of the Asian boy walking by.

Kai made his way through the congestion of people and stopped at a sedan parked along the road.

The driver's side window rolled down.

"This week's North London derby has been postponed. Emirates closed down."

Louis held a bag of fish and chips from a local pub in one hand and rolled up the tabloid paper in the other.

Kai walked around to the passenger side and opened the door. The air conditioner was mercifully cool.

"Don't they do a derby somewhere every week?"

Wasn't this the country that had invented soccer? Even within the city of London, there were so many top-class professional soccer teams that Kai couldn't count them all. Even second- and third-tier matches filled stadiums. When you turned on the television, if they weren't showing soccer, it was probably a rugby or tennis match.

It was similar in Russia and France. Some American sports, like ice hockey and basketball, were well known, but others, like baseball and American football, were not very popular in Europe.

It had been nearly two years since they had left Okinawa. At the beginning, Kai had longed to watch Japanese broadcasts of

professional baseball, but eventually he had grown accustomed to the European climate and customs.

Maybe after a year in one place, that culture becomes your norm.

"Sometimes I have a hankering for a major-league game." It appeared the American-born Louis also missed baseball.

And yet, Kai didn't feel like talking about it with him.

A long time ago, Kai had been forced to wash his hands of baseball. In any case, he had more important things to worry about right now. It was important to remember the past, but at this point in his life, Kai didn't feel a need for nostalgia.

He leaned back in the passenger seat and took out his sunglasses from his breast pocket. After putting them on, he blocked the air duct with his palm.

"Looks like it was a Chiropteran."

"Even though the 'terror suspects' who set the 'bomb' escaped through the sewer system?" Louis sneered sarcastically as he handed Kai a paper cup full of coffee.

"No matter what, the SAS doesn't have the equipment."

"You're probably right."

This was the twelfth Chiropteran incident in only a handful of months that had led to a section of London shutting down.

The explosions had been blamed on terrorists, and the citizens of London were starting to feel the burden of so many forced evacuations.

At a glance, the pedestrians using the sidewalk didn't seem any different than they had six months ago.

However, true Londoners surely said that the London of today was not the real London. If it were a typical weekend, pubs in the

city would have been filled to the rafters with beer-drinking customers glued to the TV screens showing the Guinness Premiership matches, but for the last several weeks, several of the shopping districts have been forcibly closed, and the number of people walking the streets after sundown was noticeably lower.

"I bet it was like this after Jack the Ripper showed up."

After smiling at the newspaper headline, Louis pulled a deep fried morsel from the paper sack. England had a reputation for producing Europe's least delicious cuisine, but that didn't seem to quell Louis's appetite for its most popular dish.

"If they get away again, they'll just regenerate and show up somewhere else. If the Credenhill brass catch wind, then you can forget about tea time." Louis wiped his greasy fingers on the newspaper and then put his hand on the wheel. The late-model German car moved to the street and slid into the flow of traffic.

Louis could joke about it, but it wasn't only the Credenhill SAS officials putting on the pressure. The Westminster cabinet members were also sweating bullets.

It was evident the British Parliament was aware of the existence of Chiropterans.

But they were not yet prepared to make their existence public knowledge. This hesitation was due to the difficulty of a government body to acknowledge that a fairy-tale creature impervious to bullets actually existed. Instead, they put the screws on their ally, the USA.

After a short drive, Louis stopped the car along the roadside, parallel to the river Thames.

The nineteenth-century bronze light posts had twenty-first-century incandescent bulbs that attracted the flying autumn insects.

With the engine still running, Louis rolled down the window. The window of the small car parked next to him also opened.

"Yo. Nice timing."

The older-model Bentley was parked the opposite way, so that from his driver's seat, Louis could speak with the driver of the other car.

It was Okamura.

A year ago, Kai had thought nothing of the cameraman from the Okinawan newspaper, but now he was a precious source of information. The information on the latest SAS Chiropteran cleanup had come from him and his "assistant."

"How was the scene of the incident?"

"Just as you would imagine. Guns aren't enough to kill Chiropterans." It was Kai who leaned forward to answer the question.

As his hand patted his chest, instinctually looking for a pack of cigarettes, the energetic cameraman raised his eyebrows. "It was a holdup? So it's because our sole hero—I mean heroine—who can kill the Chiropterans has disappeared?!"

Okamura's forehead slammed into the dashboard.

Mao had grabbed the back of his head and pushed it forward from the passenger seat.

"It's OK, Kai."

Kai had held his breath as he heard Okamura's words. He looked at Mao's stiff smile.

"There's no need to worry about Otonashi. I will find her and bring her back."

". . . Yeah. I'm counting on you." Kai tried to smile, but he could tell that he wasn't by the reaction on Mao's face.

He was missing a lot of things right now.

One year ago, he had watched the Red Shield headquarters sink into the sea just beyond the port at Marseilles. He felt like his entire reason for living had sunk with it.

Riku. And Saya.

Separated from his little brother and younger sister, he had arrived at a place where he couldn't reach them.

Red Shield had collapsed, and most of the surviving members had quit.

Kai's world had become completely hollow.

He had absolutely no memories of the month he had spent in the hospital healing from his injuries. Not the color of the hospital walls, his doctor's face, or even the taste of the probably crappy food there. Nothing.

What was burned in his memory was brilliant red.

He was pretty sure it had been around the time he had left the hospital.

His belongings had been brought to him by a young black nurse.

Among them had been his bloody clothes, George's pistol, a picture of the three siblings . . . and the red crystal from Saya.

"It's beautiful."

It was when the nurse had said those words that Kai had gripped the stone and begun to weep.

They weren't tears of hopelessness.

He had never felt so refreshed from crying before.

I am still alive.

That's what Riku had told him. Now, instead of protecting Riku, Kai needed to protect Saya.

Saya would come back. Kai believed that.

He had lived his life maintaining faith in that feeling ever since that fateful day.

He had gotten back into physical training for the first time since quitting baseball, and he had learned about handguns from one of David's war buddies. He had sparred and developed his hand-to-hand fighting skills.

It kept him busy during the day, but Kai did sometimes feel depressed.

Was Saya really still alive . . . ?

If he thought about it too much, the crevasses in his brain filled with fear and dread. On nights like that, Kai grasped the piece of his brother's remains embedded in the necklace he wore with both hands and looked toward the morning.

The answer to all those days came in the form of their enemy, the Chiropterans.

Eyewitness reports of Chiropterans in England had sprung up suddenly.

Just as there had been in Vietnam, there appeared to be an unnatural explanation for the sudden appearances. The evidence pointed to the strong possibility that Diva was still alive.

Riku's murderer. But how? Saya had been that close to killing her!

Had Saya been torn in two?

That didn't seem likely.

That Diva was alive didn't mean Saya was dead. If Diva was still alive, anyone could conclude that Saya was, too.

Most of the surviving Red Shield members had lost hope, and Kai smoldered and bit his lip to keep from cursing them.

He couldn't turn his back on the chance to see his sister's smiling face once again.

Kai had decided to fight.

"—How about something on the other missing person?"

Louis's tease made Okamura sit up. A smile rose behind his scraggly whiskers. He had something. "We got info on her location."

"Where?"

"It's not surprising to hear that she is in England. You know that the American secretary of defense is visiting England this month, right?"

The media had been very focused on topics surrounding the terrorist bombings. They had reported that the secretary had been invited by the prime minister to meet with the top military leaders in England.

"Quite a mess to be stuck in. With their disappointment in the Eurofighter Typhoons, he's going to try to push some F-22 Raptors, I bet."

Both Louis and Okamura kept close tabs on the latest competition on defense contracts between different countries. Okamura took Louis's bait. "Well, even if the U.S. and EU were not rivals in the fighter-plane trade, the subject of proper armaments would be bound to come up. On the American side, Goldsmith Holdings is a consultant."

"Goldsmith as a war mediator . . . I don't like the sound of that."

"And with him were dispatched certain employees. Among them are . . ."

"I would assume the name Julia Silverstein is one." Louis muttered the name he expected to hear.

"Julia . . . ?" Without thinking, Kai repeated her name. His voice sounded thorny.

On the day Red Shield had been destroyed, Julia had not returned to the ship.

David and Louis hadn't said anything, but Kai knew there was a rumor among some of the other members that Collins and Julia had abandoned the organization.

Since Red Shield no longer existed, and the handful of members like Louis and Kai who kept up the fight were spread out all over the place, it was possible that Julia hadn't intentionally run away, but rather that she had just gotten separated from the group. Nevertheless, Kai suspected that she had followed her mentor, Collins, to Goldsmith.

A year had gone by, and she hadn't come back.

At one point, she had been a member of Saya's support team, helping her in the fight, but now she was no longer Shield. That's how Kai saw it.

"Julia Silverstein and Professor Aston Collins have been summoned to meet the military brass from America and England. And get this: they aren't meeting in a government office or military base. The meeting is at a Cinq Flèche foodstuffs laboratory."

"There? What do they think they are . . . ?"

"That, I do not know. But we do think that a Cinq Flèche food-manufacturing branch furnishes food for the American military. At least, that's our suspicion."

"Even if we knew for sure, we couldn't interfere." With both hands on the wheel, Louis breathed hard out of his nostrils, clouding the windshield.

". . . I'll try to find out."

"It's no good."

Hearing Kai grumble his opinion, Mao spoke up.

"It's too dangerous. Going to a secret base like spies."

"That's why it's worth checking out. You never know. What if Diva is . . ."

"No. Mao is right." Louis's face was calm.

Kai realized that Louis was commenting on Kai's feelings of being unprepared.

And he was probably right. Kai had spent a lot of time training over the last year, but he still lacked experience, even though he told himself he was ready to die if needed.

". . . The other guy wouldn't hesitate to go and check it out."

Both Kai and Louis instantly caught the meaning behind Okamura's lament.

If David were here . . .

If David were in charge, maybe they could have taken another stab at bringing the powerful Diva down. Not only the four people in the cars, but all the remaining members of Red Shield probably shared that opinion.

Unfortunately, the David of now was not the David of the past.

He went to observe Chiropterans where they appeared, but he would unholster his pistol only if civilians were threatened. David, along with Kai and Louis, had repeated this regimen every single night, until one day they had simply stopped.

"If you can't act like a man when it's really necessary, how can you be called a leader? If Otonashi saw this, she'd be in tears." Mao's unrelenting words struck Kai's heart.

He wasn't the same person as he had been before. Kai kept those words to himself as he crushed the paper coffee cup in his hand.

"Welcome back!"

As he opened the door, a dog rubbed against his legs. Its tail wagged frantically in all directions, showing how excited and happy it was.

"Were you still up?"

Naturally, the border collie couldn't reply. Kai leaned down to rub the dog's coat as he looked up to another figure standing to his side. The lights were still on in the restroom next to the stairs, and he could see a young girl in pajamas, who was just as excited to see him as the dog was.

"Welcome back, Kai!"

"It's good to be here, Javia."

At five years old, Javia weighed about as much as the sheepdog. Kai lifted up her little body with ease. She had a soft, Asian-looking face.

"You're back, Louis!"

Another child, this one a boy with a more Arab-looking skin tone, ran straight into Louis's round belly. Nahabi seemed to be a year or two older than Javia, but Kai didn't know how old he actually was.

"Yo, ho ho! Nice tackle."

They were orphans, and weren't blood related.

"You're late." A well-built man followed Javia out of the restroom. He had been getting the two children ready for bed.

He had distinct and vivid facial features, but his deep wrinkles and receding hairline signaled a man a bit past his forties. And yet, his broad chest and thick biceps would have more than sufficed for typical farm labor. Someone who had never met him before would have looked at all the scars exposed below the rolled-up sleeves of his plaid button-down and thought that this man was trouble.

The owner of the farm was named Gray. At one time he had been a fighter in the French Foreign Legion, and David's superior officer.

After the collapse of Red Shield, Gray had allowed Kai and the other fprmer members to stay with him, showing real compassion. Gray was the one who had taken Kai under his wing and given him proper training in pistol shooting.

"I hate to have to ask, but could I borrow your shower?"

"Kai, you stinky!" Javia's face scrunched up as she spoke. Apparently he was as smelly as a drainage ditch.

"Yeah, you smell! Where were you?" Still attached to Louis's abdomen, looking like a flying squirrel in midleap, Nahabi only turned his head toward Kai and sniffed the air rather obviously.

Kai couldn't help but smile as he looked back and forth at the two of them.

"To tell the truth . . . I was exterminating ghosts."

"Wha-? Ghost?"

"There's no such thing."

Unlike Javia, who was gripping Kai's shirt tightly with two hands, the older Nahabi didn't seem to buy Kai's story. He still believed in Santa Claus, though . . . at least this year.

"You really think there are no such things as ghosts? They especially like to visit houses where the children stay up too late, or so I hear."

"No . . . no way."

"You're right. I'm just joking. Now get to bed." Kai laughed and mussed Nahabi's hair with his hand while he handed Javia to Gray with his other hand and headed toward the bathroom.

". . . What's David up to?"

"The usual."

Kai turned and looked at Gray as he began his way up the stairs.

The usual.

That wasn't a phrase Kai would have ever thought could be used to describe David's life. The exact opposite, really.

"Yeah . . . ?"

"He only does things one way. Try to bend him, and he'll break into a million pieces. There was nothing more important to him than that Red Shield."

Gray didn't know details about Red Shield or the Chiropterans, but he had put up Kai and the others out of kindness and friendship for David.

Nahabi and Javia weren't Gray's real children. Kai assumed they were war orphans that Gray had adopted. He was the type

of generous man who lived to share his time and space with others. Kai felt that Gray had a lot in common with George.

"People need a reason to keep going. That's what he seems to have lost lately."

". . ." Stuck in silence, for a moment Kai forgot why he was headed for the bathroom.

Louis didn't even try to lighten the mood with a joke.

It probably wouldn't have been a good idea to mention the Julia situation to David at that moment. On the other hand, nothing could have broken his heart any more than it already was.

For now, they would do what they could.

Although the U.S. boasted of having the largest military in the world, English citizens thought superior counterterrorism forces could be found in the British Empire.

SAS was the first modern-day special military force, and was a model used by every nation after World War II. America's incredibly strong military unit, Delta Force, was no exception. To the British armed forces, the name of SAS founder David Stirling carried as much respect and honor as those of Francis Drake, Horatio Nelson, Duke Arthur Wellesley, R. J. Mitchell, or Bernard Montgomery; and Stirling was as strong and proud as any of the big boys heading for the independent colonies in the eighteenth century.

But that would change starting today.

"SAS is being beaten at its own game, even with three men to each monster . . ."

The British officer's murmur came out less awe than like shock.

The distinguished military men stared at the screen, dumbfounded. Once he decided they had seen enough, Van Argeno, the young executive of Goldsmith Holdings, put his hands together.

The clap sounded like a small boom as it echoed through the control room.

"Without the use of firearms, the 'mouse' was dead exactly thirty seconds later."

Van enjoyed the sweet flavor of the chocolate candy slowly melting in his mouth as he summed up and looked over the other people in the room. There was Secretary of Defense Grant, who looked to be in his early sixties, and the female secretary of state, Ms. Brett, who was very close with the president. Among these big-wheel American politicos was a younger man who caught Van's attention.

Although the other visitors were seated on the expensive guest sofa, this man was rigid, as if standing at attention, and made no move to take a seat. His navy-blue American naval officer's uniform looked like it was made of steel. James Ironside—even his name sounded hard—was the elite officer who was in charge of the exercise that had just been performed.

"Well done. A perfect presentation."

Despite the high praise, James's tone carried no emotion. His rational eyes scarcely rose.

Without Anshel's encouragement, this stiff man would likely not have wanted to participate in the planning. He was their inside connection to the U.S. military, and Van had never ex-

changed a word with him that wasn't directly related to work. Yet, he was extremely efficient and skillful, and had no problems delivering the product. To military men, discipline went hand in hand with a sense of control.

From the start of the exercise, he had said only four words into the intercom.

"Suppression."

"Splash."

"Terminate."

"Complete."

Thirty seconds had passed.

By the time the second hand had moved 180 degrees to the opposite side of the clock, the monitor showed the "mouse," which had been moving only seconds earlier, reduced to several large chunks of meat.

There was no room for doubt that the nearly immortal monster was dead.

The videotape was sped up to show that the bloody remains did not stand again.

Attempting a stunt like that would be very risky, even for a heavily armed troop of soldiers.

The three executioners of the "mouse" could be seen on the monitor. All three wore sleeveless shirts, cargo pants, and military boots. Their heads were covered with full-face carbon helmets for protection. The only equipment they carried were the matter-of-fact, large-scale blades in their right hands.

"Maybe you would like to introduce us to the three brave soldiers who slaughtered the werewolf, Mister Argeno?" James asked.

"We call *that* the Corpse Corps. Now, what you have been seeing in London are 'mice,' and if they are the same kind of creature you saw here, the corps should be more than sufficient in dealing with them."

Van's triumphant explanation was received by very British bows of assent.

"'Corpse Corps,' you say . . . ? Sounds like something King Tut would employ."

Perhaps that was the joke of an old English officer who'd been around since they had fought the Nazis in Germany. But Van was not interested in discussing the past. He wanted to get back to business.

"It's the name of the Enhanced Special Tactics Force. They look like people, but were actually genetically engineered from the ground up. The name is a bit unnerving."

Of course, everyone in the room knew that human genetic manipulation and cloning was considered taboo in the international community.

Van pulled another wrapped piece of candy from his pocket, and faced the monitor while spying on the U.S. military VIPs from the corner of his eye. "Americans should be enthusiastic to find a weapon that allows them to protect their country without risking the souls of American fighting men and women."

This is the country that, in order to save the lives of their own soldiers, had massacred tens of thousands in Hiroshima and Nagasaki. They surely knew as much about scientific taboos as they did about ethics.

Van was determined to see through the sale of the Corpse Corps to the military, which would lead in turn to economical,

material, and human support for both Goldsmith Holdings and Cinq Flèche.

They would be very valuable partners.

The cynicism came after Defense Secretary Grant cleared his throat. "My country fights for justice and balance in the world with no regrets. We participated quietly in the development of the Corpse Corps with the understanding it would be used to benefit the international community."

"But of course." Van lobbied his agreement for the benefit of the British in the room.

In other words, the U.S. would do absolutely anything to keep itself the number-one superpower and justify it under the guise of protecting the world.

It wasn't that different from the strategy of Van's beloved home country of France—spreading the seeds of strife in the Middle East and Africa, or profiting from weapons sales and oil deals while turning a blind eye to dictatorships and ethnic cleansing.

And England's hands were no cleaner. It was one of the countries that had been able to successfully maintain its own interests through World War II. Exploiting third-world countries in the name of defeating fascism left no long-term scars.

"What is the country's present state? A rough estimate is fine." The question came from Secretary of State Brett.

"We are presently confirming whether we have ever experienced this phenomenon before where people suddenly transform into monsters," Grant replied. "Depending on different factors, it's possible a number of incidents have been concealed. That being said,

the incidence rate has exploded over the past several months here, and it is difficult to chart any rhyme or reason to the pattern."

"But there have been many rumors, no? Terrorists, serial killers, deadly disease."

That could be expected. The only ones who could release 'mice' in London were Van's subordinates. It was unfortunate that citizens had to be sacrificed, but this was part of the corporate strategy.

"By the duty of ally nations, I offer you a troop of Corpse Corps."

The British military officials had probably been waiting for Grant to make his proposal.

Naturally the American offered the troops free of charge. Even with diplomacy as a reason for such a rental fee, he expected an immediate decision as he extended his hand, leaving them little choice.

"Understood. I act on this agreement by the power entrusted to me from Her Majesty, the Queen of England. With this power I humbly request a loan of the Enhanced Special Tactics Force."

"With pleasure."

As the British officer shook hands with Grant, a stiff-looking wave of people came forward like a group of reporters vying to get close to their subject. Just looking at their faces, one could see they were clearly British, grim and gentlemanly at the same time.

For Van, this was a gigantic result. After a year of hard work, the implementation of a step in Anshel's plan was finally coming to fruition. Lord Goldsmith should be pleased.

Most of the monitor screen in the control room was relaying the Corpse Corps, exercise ground and related intelligence, but Julia's

eyes grew tired and drifted to a different video screen.

It showed a separate room for visiting guests.

On top of a carpet which was too nice for a foodstuffs research and development facility, she could see both American and British military men exchanging handshakes. The military and the Corpse Corps looked very out of place in a plant that made frozen dinners, cookies, and dehydrated vegetables.

"..."

For the past year, since escaping Red Shield, Julia had immersed herself in Chiropteran research under the patronage of Goldsmith Holdings.

And they had been wonderful days.

For a researcher, the ability to explore such uncharted territory erased any feelings of guilt or hesitation that might have remained. With every successful experiment and verified simulation, her body shook with the knowledge that they were making advances.

But the end result was the Corpse Corps, and seeing the smiles on the military commanders' faces made her miserable.

In the end, the results of her research had been used to make monsters that looked like humans.

Two hands fell on her shoulders, and Julia's heart raced in surprise.

How long had Collins been standing behind her?

"The Corpse Corps is getting closer to seeing practical use. We are finally seeing the fruits of our labor. To think, they were only cultivated from the culture tank eighty days ago and are already at practical-use grade. It is really something."

"Yes . . . But they're synthetic Chevalier. We manufactured Chiropterans, man's natural enemy."

"That's just one way of looking at it. Yes, those are Chiropterans which were created by our hands. But we were able to soften their negative traits and remove the savagery without reducing their intelligence. It would be better to call them Chevalier-strength humans . . . Or better yet, the way you put it—the perfect weapon to follow man's commands."

Julia lowered her eyes.

It might have been because she had been wearing her glasses all day, but the backs of her eyes felt heavy. Julia's insecurities about the project increased in proportion to the Corpse Corps' preparedness for active production.

She forgot about it when she was focused on her research, but when she wasn't in the lab, this pang of doubt would slowly grow in her chest.

"What is it? You look exhausted." Collins's hands moved to the back of her chair as he looked down at her.

"No . . . But are they people? Are they things?"

"Whoa, whoa. That's not a rabbit hole you want to really go down, is it?"

Collins laughed sarcastically and leaned back as he ruffled Julia's hair. "I can see how you could think that. You are thinking that the creation of life only belongs in the hands of God. It's the mistaken trap children of Christian upbringing fall into."

"A trap . . . you say . . ." Julia spun her chair around and looked up at Collins.

Collins's expression quickly changed. He laughed fanatically, a heretic spitting on the normal values of society.

"That kind of thinking is blasphemy to God. We've passed the age of man's moralistic drudgery. Trends and opinions change. It's an ambiguous fog! If God really existed, this wouldn't bother him. Nothing man does or creates can be considered blasphemy."

Collins raised his right hand in the air, almost in praise of God. "If God were really omniscient, then he would be able to see the experiments we conduct. There's no need for him to hide his feelings."

"That's not what . . ." He had twisted her words like he was trying to fool a child. A man like Collins couldn't honestly think so irrationally.

"All right, Julia?" Collins had gotten unusually close to where Julia was sitting when he punched the desk, spilling a paper cup full of coffee.

"Your feelings are a problem for those who choose to feel them. As a researcher, your responsibility is to forge a trail to the future for the sake of humanity. You can't let these things faze you. Find your courage and blaze forward."

". . . You're right, Professor." Julia heard the words from her mouth as if they were spoken by a stranger.

The coffee dripped from the desk, staining her white coat.

On this day, London was quiet.

There were no terrorist attacks or appearances of Chiropterans, so Kai and Louis had the rare chance to put together quite a

delicious meal on the dinner table. Seeing Nahabi and Javia eat Gray's simple but home-cooked meals was nostalgic for Kai.

Autumn in Okinawa hadn't chilled Kai to the bone like it did in England, but George's specialties, like American-style veggie-and-shrimp soup or Okinawan fried blue papaya and red-haired squash, shared at a noisy dinner table with the constantly laughing Saya and Riku, had warmed Kai's body after a cool ride on his motorcycle.

"Thank you for this meal." Holding her knife and fork between her hands, Javia bowed her head toward Kai.

"Not yet. There are still some vegetables on your plate."

"I can't stand carrots!"

"I'll eat 'em." Just like a big brother, Nahabi scooped the carrots from her bowl-shaped plate and slung them into his mouth. "All done. What a feast."

"Nahabi, when you get older, you'll be a lot like me."

"No!" Nahabi responded scathingly after watching Louis consume three bowls of *pot-au-feu*.

After he finished dinner and had washed the dishes in the kitchen, Gray appeared in the doorway to the dining room.

"You have a visitor."

From behind his robust body appeared an electric wheelchair.

A young man sat in the chair, and he turned and smiled toward the table like a stranger trying to sell something.

"Hello. It's been a long time."

"Joel . . ."

Kai stood from his chair without realizing it, but Louis was already walking toward his former commander. He wasn't in a rush, but their long relationship drew him toward the man, it seemed.

"What happened? Why, all of a sudden?"

"Because, Louis, I didn't want to interrupt your supper."

With that joke, Joel turned to his host earnestly.

"It is rude of me to ask, but is it possible for us to speak in private?"

"I'll bring some tea to the living room." Gray consented to his request. Joel was thinking about the children.

At first, Nahabi and Javia were surprised by the electric wheelchair, a device they had never laid eyes on before, but the owner's gentle expression and the fact that Kai and the others seemed to know who he was appeared to reassure them. They looked at Joel with great interest.

But the conversation that was going to take place was not meant for young ears. That came across clearly to Kai.

This was the first time the partially paralyzed Joel had made an effort to come talk to them. Until now, they had visited him on the rented penthouse of the high-class London hotel where he was staying.

Once Gray had brought English tea to the living room they had migrated to, and left again, Joel glanced back toward Kai and set a small cardboard box on top of the living-room table.

"Made just as you ordered."

Kai lifted the lid to reveal an army of .45 Colt shells in rows pointing straight up at him. The tips of these special mini-warheads were painted red.

"The red part is the igniter. Anything within the range of the warhead will feel it."

His explanation was a repeat of a request Kai had made. Individually, these special bullets weren't explosives, but when fired

with explosives, they were many times more powerful than ordinary bullets. It meant having to prepare the explosives in advance, but that was for the safety of the handgun user and couldn't be helped. A poorly made explosive bullet would turn the gun itself into a bomb.

"But do you think you'll really be able to take down Chiropterans using these?"

"Yeah. I have no choice."

Kai knew killing the practically immortal Chiropterans this way wouldn't be easy. However, anything that might help, even by the tiniest margin, had to be tried.

There was no way Joel could complain about that.

The still-young man no longer had the use of his legs, but he had a long life ahead of him. Karl had injured his lower spine, paralyzing him from the waist down.

The Chiropterans had taken away Joel's ability to walk, along with many of his men and his organization's headquarters. Yet, they hadn't been able to take his courage or his desire to keep up the fight.

Talking with Joel made Kai feel stronger.

"You are like me. Can't seem to get us to give up." With those words, Kai picked up the box of ammunition on the table.

Joel smiled, then suddenly turned his head.

He had probably heard the sound of footsteps coming down the stairs.

They stopped at the entrance to the living room.

"Guests at this hour?"

The voice sounded corroded, and the speaker, a tired-looking white man, propped himself up against a support pillar. He wore

an untucked, white-collared shirt. The open collar was stained with something. His blond and gray hair was tousled like he had just woken up, and his expression was stern.

He caught the glance of the visitor, and opened his eyes only slightly.

"... David." As Joel whispered his name, the look on his face was a complex tangle of affection and loneliness and guilt that turned into a small smile. There was no hate or disdain in his eyes when, after looking at his former comrade in battle and trusted friend, Joel lowered his head.

A small moan came from his lips, hidden behind unkempt whiskers, and David turned without another word and walked down the corridor.

Joel watched his hunched-over back as he shuffled off, and for several moments he kept his grief-filled silence, before asking, "Is it my fault that this is what he has become?"

Kai was perplexed by Joel's unexpected choice of words.

"I made a mess of everything he relied on. And we didn't even reach our goal. He didn't say it, but I think he feels resentful of me."

"You're overthinking it." Kai wasn't able to say the words, so Louis spoke for them both. "I really like the way you care about other people. He does, too."

"You're too kind. If I had paid closer attention, Kai's younger brother and Saya would . . ."

"She's still alive." Kai cut Joel off with a rather stubborn tone.

"And Riku, he's right here. I can feel him." Kai pulled out the necklace from under his shirt and gripped the locketlike jewelry in his hand. It held a piece of Riku's body inside and it felt warm.

"... You are very strong, aren't you?" Joel's voice was earnest and his face was dead serious.

Kai released some of the strength in his grip, and, to ease his embarrassment, looked out the window. "I must wait for Saya to come back, because if I don't, that will make me a liar."

It was very quiet on a farm at night. The next closest house was over a kilometer away.

Maybe Saya was sleeping somewhere in the same silent darkness.

The bright morning of the next day quickly turned to a busy night.

Using information from Okamura, Kai and Louis sped to a Chiropteran sighting at Stamford Bridge, via Piccadilly.

The garish home stadium of the former champion team rose in the dark at the edge of town. Kai and George could see it from the road.

It was already after two in the morning, and there was no one around.

"Over there!" Louis noticed it from the driver's seat and turned the wheel before Kai had a chance to point it out.

The screech of the tires interrupted the neighborhood's peaceful rest as the heavy German-made car quickly changed directions.

The orange flash of gunfire, along with loud reports, came from an alleyway.

It was a policeman doing the shooting.

The target of his fire was a two-legged monster that stood well over two meters tall. At first the beast recoiled from the bullets, but its pain quickly changed to anger, and it rushed toward the cop.

"We're not going to make it. I'm gonna crash into it!"

"Hey, hey . . . !"

Kai's protest was drowned out by the roar of the engine and the sound of impact.

His upper body was squeezed by his seat belt, and it was difficult to breathe. The air bags had inflated and from behind them Kai could see the monster, which had been thrown by the bumper which pounded its flank.

There was no time even to cough.

Kai quickly pushed away the deflated air bag, undid his seatbelt, and kicked open the car door. He shouted as his feet hit the pavement.

"Hey, you! Get outta here!"

"Wha . . ." The policeman could hardly even speak, but he was still standing. He was probably trying to think of something a public servant was supposed to say in this sort of occasion, and as he stuttered out something incomprehensible, the fog in front of the car began to move.

Kai quickly raised the muzzle of his Colt Government with both hands, and, without hesitating, he unloaded his pistol at his enemy.

Seven bullets pierced the monster's chest, and it looked up to the sky before falling over.

Kai took that chance to grab the igniter bullets from his pocket and began loading the injection port. With his finger still on the trigger guard, he pulled back the slide and locked a bullet in the chamber.

A growl like a motorcycle's engine rose from the ground as the monster lifted up the top half of its body.

The gunshot wounds in its chest were already starting to heal. It would only be a matter of time before the bullets worked their way out. But that wasn't time Kai was going to give.

He knelt down and squeezed the trigger.

The recoil felt the same as any other bullets.

The small bang that went off from the igniter that lodged in the Chiropteran's heart ignited the other bullets as well.

The muffled explosions were followed by a shower of blood and flesh all around the surrounding area.

"Graaaawr . . ."

Blood poured from between the monster's jaws, and it stepped backward unsteadily. Where its chest had been was now mostly a gaping crater, exposing its torn innards and shattered ribs.

"Get outta here! That thing ain't dead!"

As Kai changed magazines, he yelled at the cop again. Kai was relieved to see that after a moment of hesitation, the policeman turned and began to run toward the main street.

But that feeling was only temporary.

"Look out, Kai!"

Louis pulled his large body from the driver's seat, and Kai heard him pump-load his shotgun.

Kai turned around and reflexively dove sideways. He saw what looked like a giant wallet fly past him and hit the building wall with a wet thud. A red spray covered the thing that fell to the ground.

It was the distorted body of the policeman, folded in two.

"Shit."

Kai pointed his pistol toward the rear of the car. In the fog he could make out the hazy shape of a Chiropteran. There was a second one.

"... Louis, get the car ready."

"Got it."

It was unfortunate, but they weren't ready to take on two Chiropterans at once.

Louis fired slugs from his SPAS shotgun into the second monster's kneecaps one after the other as he made his way back to the driver's seat. Using this covering fire, Kai lined up his sights with the center of the enemy's forehead. Right then, a shriek pierced the moonlit night.

"Up . . . ?!"

Kai and Louis both shot their gazes to the sky above. The moon was overlapped by a strange-looking shadow. The two of them promptly threw themselves to the ground as the large body fell straight into the roof of the car, sending glass shards falling like raindrops.

"A third one showed up!" Kai quickly stood up as he brushed the glass from his head.

He had completely misread the situation. He still didn't know if the igniter bullets really worked, and this was too much of a situation to test them in.

Kai's stomach was in knots.

Ever since he had decided to fight, he had been prepared for this day to come. Yet, in the face of his own death, he had no intention of quitting.

The Chiropteran on top of the car slowly straightened its curved back.

Kai saw large volumes of white mist as the creature panted like an animal, and then its glowing red eyes peered over the side of the roof and right into Kai's face.

Without saying a word, Kai raised his pistol up—but just before he pulled the trigger, Kai noticed something was different.

The Chiropteran wasn't looking at him.

No Chiropteran ever complained about feeding off of a human, and Kai was definitely within its field of vision, but it ignored him, turning its head left and right, very slowly. As if it were scared.

"Look at that," Louis whispered to Kai.

Kai soon understood why he had spoken so softly.

There was a long and deep laceration in the Chiropteran's chest.

The monster had been sliced by an incredibly sharp blade. From that wound, not a drop of blood leaked out.

It wasn't closing. There were no signs that the wound was regenerating.

Crack . . . Crackle . . .

Kai was able to hear the quiet sound of Death's footsteps.

The Chiropteran's skin lost its color and turned dry, like it was made out of salt.

The transformation began at the cut and wound its way around the monster's body. After several seconds, the creature's entire body had converted into crystal.

Its face frozen in fear, the Chiropteran's jaw broke open and its head snapped off at the neck.

Its arms and legs began to crumble, and sandy chunks rolled off the roof of the car.

"This means . . ."

This was a spectacle he had seen many times.

There was only one person in the world that could bring such death to the immortal phantoms—

"—Saya?" Kai's whisper was drowned out by the distant chime of a bell.

With that sign, the remaining two Chiropterans began to move.

Attacks came from the front and rear of the alley. One was headed for Kai and the other for Louis.

But it wasn't the right time to respond with gunfire.

The wall unexpectedly exploded.

Pieces of brick and concrete pummeled the Chiropterans, followed by a black coffin that slammed into the torso of one of them. No matter how strong their regenerative power, it was hard to imagine anything could recover from that much damage to the upper half of its body.

The young man who walked out of the wreckage looked like a prince of the night.

His silky black hair and suit of the same color fluttered in the wind.

He lifted up the cello case, and Kai looked up at his handsome face, feeling defeated, but also feeling very warm inside.

"Hagi . . . !"

He was still alive.

But what of his master?

Angry at the slaughter of its brothers, the final beast roared and jumped into the air.

And its life ended right there.

From the roof of the building leapt a slender shadow.

Two red eyes glistened brilliantly against the night sky.

She fell like an arrow to the ground as she split open her finger on the back of the blade she carried. Kai could see the veins in the body of the katana swell with blood.

The tip of the sword was pointed straight down, and she was falling at a tremendous speed when she slammed into the flying Chiropteran's spine.

Her blade slid between its vertebrae and exited its abdomen just below the ribs.

At the moment of the blade's impact, she turned her legs downward, moving from a nose dive to a feet-first stance in order to slam the body of the monster into the ground. Its spine snapped, and its shoulder blades were crushed under her boots.

The devastating sound of the impact echoed through the alley.

The body of the Chiropteran under her feet had made a divot in the surface of the road and had already begun to turn to stone.

Once it had crystallized all the way through, Saya's weight on its back caused the whole thing to collapse. Her black rider boots, which were of the same synthetic leather material as her outfit, sank into the Chiropteran's body.

Kai lowered his gun and took a long look at the girl.

"You're . . . Saya . . . aren't you?"

She returned her sword to its scabbard, the cold sound her only reply.

She looked away, trying not to meet his eyes. This was the profile of the younger sister he hadn't seen in a year, but at the same time it was a cruel face Kai didn't recognize.

Her hair was longer than before, and her skin looked bluish under the moonlight, which was probably why Kai had had trouble recognizing her. Kai tried to convince himself of that, but it was a waste of time.

The chime of the bell stopped.

Kai searched for words to say to his sister, and in the meantime simply looked at her.

Welcome back, Saya.

He had imagined saying that to her countless times in his dreams, but for some reason couldn't say it now.

"For starters, we should probably say thank you." Louis raised his shotgun to his shoulder as he broke the silence. "But that being said, where have you been until now? We've been worried sick. With Red Shield as it is—or was; it is basically dissolved now—we have barely been getting by. As you can see, we are open, but not really conducting business."

Saya's only response to the open and friendly greetings was a glance at Louis.

The red sheen had already faded from her eyes, but the quick glare was as cold as a snowstorm.

"Ooo, scary."

Louis was able to keep the situation light, but Kai felt a real sense of dread.

Saya had never looked at people like this before. No love or hate, just a look of meaninglessness. Like she was looking at a stranger. She had never been a girl who could be so distant.

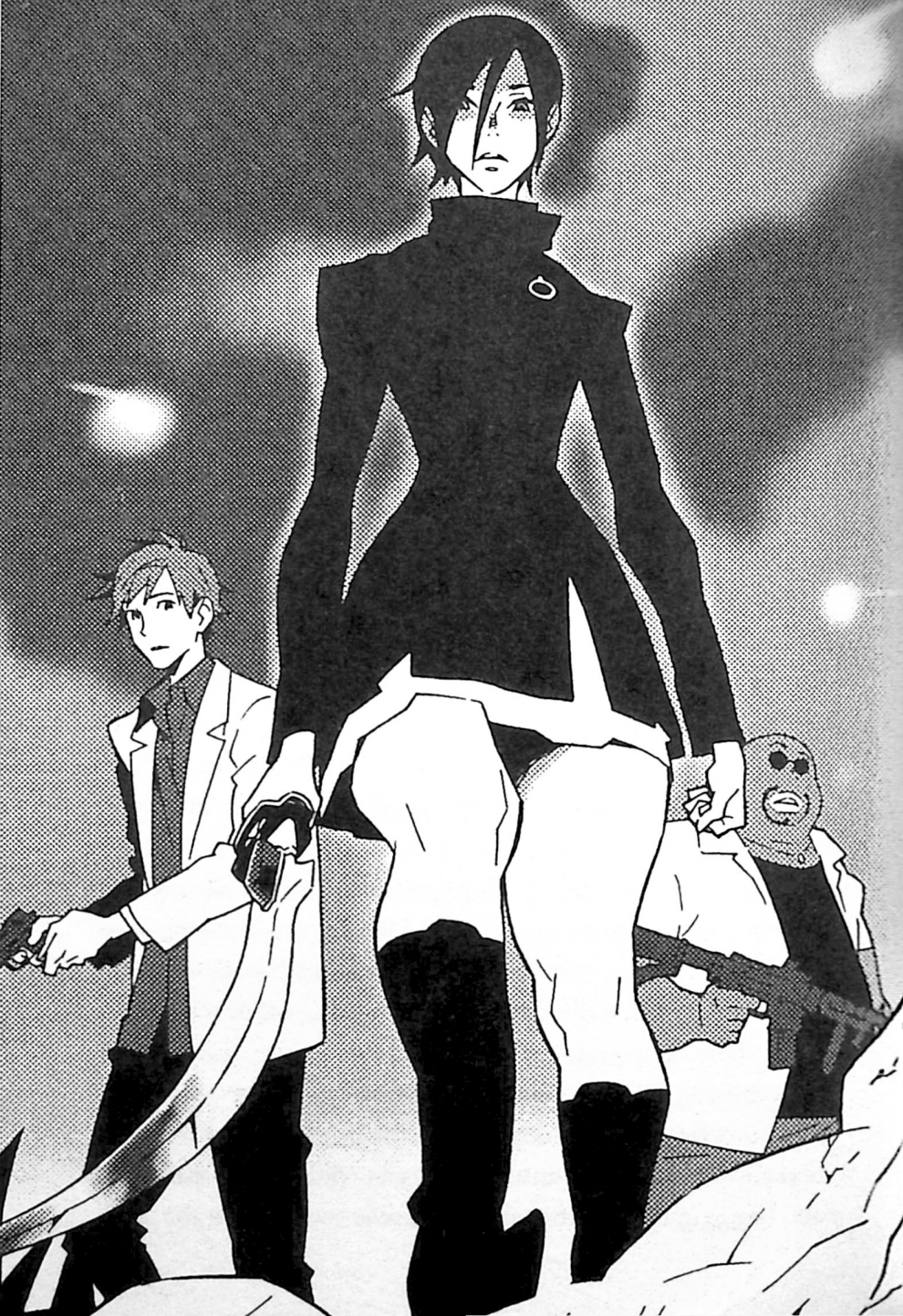
In order to avoid Kai's stare, Saya turned the other way.

"... Where are you going?"

"There are still Chiropterans in this city."

The hunt wasn't over.

She had obviously spent the past year going from place to place, bagging trophy after trophy. It was conceivable that her



short dress was dyed the color of red wine to hide any splatter of Chiropteran blood.

"Hey. You can't even give a proper hello, and you're already going to take off without saying goodbye, after all that we have been through together?" Kai took a step forward in an effort to stop her. He reached out his hand, but Louis grabbed it and pulled Kai's arm back.

The black-clad young man stood in his path.

"... Are you saying we aren't a team anymore?" Kai demanded.

"You are not our enemy."

Hagi remained faithful to Saya's every wish.

And this is what Saya wanted. To be unattached and left alone.

Saya walked away across the mineralized body of the Chiropteran.

Kai kept silent as his eyes followed her every step.

It was nearly dawn by the time they got back to Gray's farm. It had taken a while to hail a cab. Because the city was under a curfew at night, most cab drivers closed up shop early, and very few roamed the empty streets at night looking for fares.

As he dragged his tired body to the shower, Kai noticed a package wrapped in paper on the living-room table.

"From Joel . . . ?"

It was sealed with wax and stamped with the Goldschmidt seal. It was addressed to David, but it probably wasn't meant for him. If it was official business, then Kai or Louis should open it first.

"It's all right. Let's open 'er up."

With that assurance from Louis, Kai broke the seal and unwrapped the contents. Inside was a DVD.

Kai slipped the disc into the DVD player and turned on the television in the living room. It was some kind of promotional video for an English record company that had acts on the world charts. It was the kind that wasn't sold in stores, but distributed to the media and industry insiders.

The name of the artist in this video was Diva.

The voice coming out of the TV speakers slid straight to the core of Kai's soul.

Louis groaned.

A cup spilled onto the floor and the sharp smell of alcohol spread through the room. At some point David had entered the room, and now he stood in front of the door.

"What the hell is this . . . ?"

This new Asian opera singer with her arms outspread had a face they had seen before.

She had the thin arms and legs of a young boy, but her blossoming chest and curvy hips said she was definitely female.

Her eyes were as innocent as they were blue, and her voice was young and fresh, like any up-and-coming diva's.

Her face looked like Riku Miyagusuku's.

02

MANY PEOPLE ON the street took notice of the television. Ever since punk had ruled the world thirty years ago, the favorite designers of bands and producers had occupied outlandish boutiques lining the shopping districts, along with wild clubs that hosted attention-getting promotions on a regular basis. Something on one of the giant outdoor televisions that had the power to make Londoners actually stop and take a look wasn't as common as one might think.

This video had the power to do just that. Of all the new songs that were released every day, this one stuck out. A spectacular operatic voice was rare in the epicenter of the UK rock scene.

Her voice was solid, yet carefree, reminiscent of Celtic folk music. Both her voice and her face had an androgynous quality, and that mysterious hook captivated British eyes as well as ears.

One tightly packed group of glossy-eyed onlookers stood unmoving on the street in the thickening dusk. All of them wore the same dark-colored robes.

Such was the fate of the young men and women called the Schiff.

"That's Diva . . . isn't it?"

"It has to be." Moses answered Lulu's question.

No matter how she changed her appearance, the voice was unmistakable. To the Schiff, this was their loathsome mother's lullaby.

"But Diva singing openly for humans? What could her Chevaliers be thinking?" Carmen spat as he viewed the big-screen TV.

Moses rubbed his delicate chin with his gloved fingers. "I don't get it. But for us, this means—"

"Huh? That smell . . ." Lulu suddenly raised a suspicious voice as she took deep sniffs of the evening air.

Her sense of smell was strong.

It wasn't as amazing as Aurélien's had been, but Lulu's nearly infallible nose was able to detect a Chiropteran with almost pinpoint accuracy, and, depending on the situation, often from quite a distance. But just like a dog, it worked only if she had already committed the smell of the blood of that Chiropteran to memory.

That meant the Chiropteran Lulu was detecting now was one she had encountered before.

Lulu's neck swiveled back and forth, finally focusing her attention on the bustle of people moving before the giant television.

"It's Saya!"

Moses saw her, too.

Among the crowd of people traveling this way and that she stood still, staring intently at the video screen. The tall figure dressed in black standing near her must have been her Chevalier.

Although Moses hadn't seen Saya in an entire year, something seemed strange about her.

It was difficult to explain like humans could, but Moses felt she looked very stiff and sharp, and also very cold. At the same

time, she looked like she was in real pain, like she had gripped a handful of broken glass.

In her, he saw himself right after leaving Kilbed.

With no one to depend on but each other, he and his siblings had run and hidden, rejected by and rejecting any outsiders. They had learned from Aurélien and Saya's human older brother there were other people who were dependable.

Moses had no clue what battles Saya had fought over the past year. Perhaps, like the Schiff, she had been chasing Diva and hunting Chiropterans, only to find herself here.

That was nothing more than Moses's guess. He also supposed that more than fighting enemies, Saya needed a person like Kai Miyagusuku in her life.

"..."

After a few moments of silence, Moses turned his attention away from Diva's older sister.

"What? Are we leaving?"

"We have no business with her."

Saya's blood did not give the Schiff a future. They no longer had any reason to be concerned with what she did.

"Not even to say hello . . . ?"

"Say hello? Seriously, is that what you would really walk up and say to her?"

Carmen scoffed at stubborn Lulu's idea.

It had been a year since they had lost Aurélien.

Carmen had detached himself from his complex feelings about Saya's involvement in Aurélien's death because he loved her and his siblings so much. He recognized that Saya had been trying to

help Aurélien when she died, but even after this much time, the pain hadn't subsided. Deep down inside, he might even have felt like getting revenge by killing Saya.

"Don't ask hard questions!"

Lulu swatted Carmen's arm, which was resting on her head. At the same time, Gudrif pulled a brand-new poster off a building wall, crushing it between his hands. The poster showed a photo of Diva holding a blue rose.

". . . Moses, let's do this."

Crawling up Gudrif's cheeks, under his sunglasses, was the unmistakable mark of the Thorn.

Seeing this kind of stern emotion from the usually cheerful and considerate Gudrif was rare. He knew his time was short.

"If we wait for Saya to kill Diva, it will be too late. We need to get Diva's blood before Saya gets to her."

"Yes! This is our final wish." The vote of approval came from Dars. He was hiding it under his clothes, but they all knew that his arms also bore the same red cracks.

"Even if Diva's blood does nothing to help us?" Moses knew what the answer would be, but asked the question anyway.

Gudrif laughed. "Diva will share our fate."

"Even if it doesn't work . . . but there's still an outside chance it will. That's it." Dars's voice was fortified with determination. Even if Moses tried to stop him, Dars would still proceed to Diva.

Carmen turned to Moses. "Remember when we left Kilbed? You were the one who told us to have hope."

Yes. And as he had held that hope so dearly, Ghee and Aurélien had died.

He didn't know if it had been because he had clung onto hope for help . . . that would never be clear. What he did know was that in the meantime, his siblings had died, and now his brothers Gudrif and Dars were marked for a visit from Death.

"—I understand."

If Diva were to come and give a live opera performance in this town, they would likely not have a better opportunity. They would know exactly when and where she would be.

At this hour, one of London's many museums, famous but relatively out of the way, was as tranquil and quiet as the calm sea.

It was still early evening, but this building was within a restricted zone, and no visitors had darkened the entrance in days.

But this night, one of the display rooms lit up.

In that particular room were items from the Russian Empire, during the reign of Peter the Great: giant birds that couldn't fly, skeletons from carnivores with overdeveloped fangs, and long-extinct marsupials, hunted out of existence by mankind. The bizarre installations defied credulity. There was a mummified creature that was part chicken and part snake, the skeleton of an anthropoid with four legs coming out of its torso, and many suspicious-looking photographs of supposedly living things. Jars of formaldehyde held an albino rat and a two-headed cat. There was a row of human-looking skulls with protruding brows.

Anshel had chosen this as the rendezvous point not only for its security, but because Diva wouldn't get bored there.

Solomon glanced at Diva's back as she enthusiastically pressed her nose against a glass display case to get a closer look at its contents. He couldn't help but smile.

With the queen happily occupied, the five Chevaliers could continue their conversation.

"There is no problem with the Corpse Corps' power. The tests on the 'mice' are evidence of that." Dressed in his navy uniform, James delivered information on the secret Corpse Corps tests conducted at the Cinq Flèche food-testing facility a few days earlier.

Van Argeno and the Delta Project had recently moved to Anshel's supervision. Thanks to the abilities of the newly perfected Schiff-prototypes, they were in good favor with the American and British military chiefs.

"That's good." Anshel appeared pleased that the plan was progressing.

At first Solomon had been surprised to hear his elder brother's decision on Kilbed and the Schiff research, but he believed Anshel's claim that it was for the well-being of Diva and the Chevaliers, and he had done all he could to help.

No matter how many secrets Anshel kept to himself, he was the top Chevalier, and Solomon never once doubted his loyalty to Diva.

"There is one thing—"

"Ooh? Is there a problem?" Nathan took a step forward, interrupting James midsentence. He shot the officer a lascivious look, causing James to flinch in discomfort.

"We have discovered the corpses of seven 'mice' in London city limits."

"Corpses?"

James nodded at Anshel's shock. "I saw the bodies Argeno collected myself. They were not crystallized, but, rather, their heads had been destroyed by both sharp blades and blunt weapons and their blood had been completely drained."

"Oh, yuck! Do vampires really live in London?"

No one laughed at Nathan's joke.

Solomon turned to his eldest brother and sighed as he spoke. "Schiff, isn't it?"

"Mm." Anshel stroked his beard with pleasure. "They certainly are a tenacious bunch."

Somehow, the remaining Schiff had hidden themselves in England's capital city. Instead of drinking human blood to survive, they staved off starvation by hunting Chiropterans.

"What do you think, Niisan?"

"Leave them be. Let them die off in peace."

"No, we must eliminate any risks. For Diva's sake."

Anshel responded honestly to James's opinion as he looked into his brother's eyes."So, James, I will leave this issue in your hands."

The Corpse Corps was fully realized, so, while the Schiff might sting them a little, they weren't a real problem. At least that was Anshel's conclusion.

"Well, then, let's get to the main issue. Diva's performance is right around the corner. We are finally going to see the payoff from our hard work on the Delta Project: a day of celebration."

Solomon, Karl, James, Nathan—he calmly looked at each of his younger brothers, his eyes just barely narrowing unpleasantly as he continued.

"But the one who tries to block our path, Saya, has appeared once again."

A few days before, at Stamford Bridge, Chiropterans had been found with their blood crystallized and their bodies turned to stone.

The only person in existence who could cause that to happen was Diva's sister, Saya.

"..."

While everyone else was silent, Karl stifled a giggle in his throat. Solomon looked at Karl's face as it went into ecstatic spasms, then spoke disinterestedly.

"Niisan, why can't we just ignore Saya? Just like the Schiff, I don't think she can do anything to stall the Delta Project all on her own."

"You are too kind, Solomon." Nathan chuckled and fingered his earlobe, but Solomon ignored him.

"Saya's blood will kill Diva. We cannot ignore that threat." Looking at Solomon with the slightest of grins, Anshel put the debate to rest.

Karl stepped forward openly and without caution. "Anshel! I will kill Saya!"

With a look as cold as ice, Anshel glared at his younger brother, the self-appointed assassin. Then, still without saying a word, he turned to the one brother even younger than Karl.

"James, along with the Schiff, I also want you to dispose of Saya."

"As you wish." Without looking at Karl, who was frozen in shock, James gracefully accepted his eldest brother's command. His quiet face swelled with confidence.

Nathan began clapping like a proud parent cheering on his honor student. "You'll do a splendid job. Mommy will be so proud of you."

"Shut your mouth!"

Nathan knew exactly how to get a rise out of James.

"What is *this?*"

"You son of a . . . !"

James grabbed the locket Nathan held between his fingers. All the brothers knew that the gold locket James always carried contained a photograph of Diva inside.

"Anshel!"

The yelling was beginning to fill the room with tension.

"I said I would be the one to kill Saya!"

"Karl, my words reflect the intention of the brothers, and of Diva. You understand?" Anshel approached his brother openly, trying to defuse the tension.

"Anshel . . . !" Karl did not appear to want to back down. A look of near hatred was pasted on Karl's young face, and his eyes turned scarlet.

"Stop this, Karl."

Chevaliers weren't supposed to fight among themselves. Karl should have known that, but he seemed to have forgotten all the rules.

Solomon understood James's and Nathan's reactions to Karl's bloodlust. With Anshel's approval, they wouldn't hesitate to attack.

A crash electrified the air, stopping the brothers from continuing their argument.

Solomon turned around to see Diva standing in front of a display case, shards of glass all around her feet.

It appeared that she had smashed the glass with her bare hands. As blood ran down her arms, she grasped one of the exhibits with both hands.

"This is so cute!"

"Diva, you're hurt . . . !"

James quickly and calmly stepped over to where Diva stood as she hugged a mummified two-headed monkey to her chest. She held it like she was feeding a baby.

Anshel smiled. "Somehow, you always get ahold of everything you want . . ."

Anshel put a hand to his chest and bowed. The leader of the Chevaliers watched as James led Diva down the hallway, then turned back.

"Solomon, it's time for a board meeting."

"Yes, Niisan."

As director of Cinq Flèche, Solomon was also a member of the Goldsmith Holdings board of directors.

"Karl, go keep an eye on Diva."

"Are you serious . . . ?!"

Again, Karl raised his voice to protest his elder brother's orders.

"My beloved young brother, you have done such a fine job until now. But you really have become too obsessed with Saya. Have you forgotten that the reason we live is to protect Diva?"

"I will protect Diva by killing Saya! What is wrong with that?!"

"What you need right now is a little break."

"No! Diva! Let's go to Saya together! We shall dance a beautiful dance of death!"

Calling over Anshel's shoulder, Karl was dumbfounded when he received no reply. The sounds of Diva's footsteps had already faded as James shepherded her down the hallway; maybe she couldn't hear Karl's voice.

"Diva . . ."

"It's a real shame. I guess she's grown bored of your dancing." Nathan playfully punched Karl in the shoulder, but Karl didn't react to that, or to his snide comment, and just stood still, glued to the floor.

Solomon felt a pain in his heart.

No one was as honest and open as his younger brother, and when that pure mind held onto a wish, he could be sure it was all for the love of Diva. However, since the appearance of Saya, Karl had changed.

It was as if his mind were torn in two, and Solomon feared Karl was enslaved by the existence of Saya.

Already, his obsession with Saya was equal to, if not greater than, his loyalty for Diva. Knowing his love was as true as a sharp blade, Solomon couldn't help but think that Diva might be sensitive to what was happening, and disappointed to some degree.

"Let's go, Solomon."

"All right."

Solomon walked with Anshel toward the entrance, worrying about the brother he was leaving behind.

His own deep affection for Saya and Karl's deep-rooted delusions were two completely different kinds of emotions.

Solomon felt almost jealous of the emotional strength of Karl's madness and the sheer passion and energy of his clash with Saya.

However, if Karl did actually have the opportunity to lay a hand on Saya, Solomon would probably be forced to stop him.

"Solomon, keep close tabs on Karl."

"I understand."

Solomon looked at Anshel's face as they continued walking.

"If need be, we can bring him back by brute force."

"I don't think that will be necessary. *It* goes as far as here."

"..."

For a moment, Solomon forgot to walk.

He was able to surmise the meaning of his brother's words.

Anshel no longer saw Karl as a brother. From the beginning, Anshel had invited Karl from Vietnam to be an experimental subject. Based on theories Grigori had come up with in Russia, the Delta Project had started about the time Anshel was seeking an immortal Chevalier as a research subject.

That was Karl. Russia, Germany, Vietnam . . . Wars of man all made convenient covers for the Delta Project experiments, which had all started with Karl.

However, the Delta Project was reaching its final stage. A full century of hard work was about to be rewarded, and Anshel saw Karl as little more than a stubborn, rabid dog.

No, maybe it was that Anshel was jealous of Karl. Generally, experimental animals cut up with scalpels in a research lab did not become the objects of Diva's affection and were not added to

the lineup of Chevaliers. On top of that, Karl didn't act prudent or appreciative, but danced around selfishly.

In his delusional state, Karl probably blamed Saya for the way he had been separated from Diva just now and was planning to track her down and exact his revenge.

Naturally, this was all conjecture.

A step behind, Solomon hurried to catch up with his oldest brother.

". . . It will be me again this time, won't it?" Solomon was surprised by his own strange grin. Why was it when he felt sadness and resignation, he also felt a sense of loneliness? Unable to say no, even to orders he didn't want to obey, Solomon was filled with dread and self-pity. It was because of who he was that Anshel ordered him to do those sorts of things.

"You did a magnificent job in Germany." A thin smile broke across Anshel's lips and Solomon turned away to continue walking in silence.

One Chevalier had died. His name was Martin, and he had been killed during the collapse of the Third Reich in Nazi Germany. The mere thought of him brought back incredible feelings of guilt in Solomon, as those memories rushed back.

Anyone entering the room would probably have been overpowered by the dank stench of alcohol and forced to cover his mouth. But for the past several months, only one person had come into this room, only using it for a place to crash.

David was aware that he had become unconcerned with the movements of the sun.

In a constant state of drunkenness, he fell unconscious every night with a bottle in his hand, and when he woke up he didn't check his watch or the window to see what time it was, but searched the floor for whatever remained of the bottle of scotch, or beer, or whatever it was from the night before. That was his life.

"Empty . . . ?"

The beer can held nothing but air, and David tossed it toward the wall as he carried his body heavily to the hallway.

He couldn't hear the lively voices of the children like he did during the day. Javia and Nahabi went to bed around nine o'clock, so it must have been later than that. Since the day before, the two children seemed to have grown.

It was Javia's birthday the day after tomorrow, so Louis said they were making preparations, but for David, the sounds of children's voices were little more than hell on his hangovers.

Without any hesitation, David walked down the stairs toward the kitchen. There was no one in the living room.

A vision of Joel sitting in an electric wheelchair, smiling sadly, somehow rose from David's alcohol-pickled memory.

Why didn't Joel lash out at him? They had been bonded in their battle, but now David had given all that up.

". . ."

Diva was still alive.

She had snatched away Riku's body, and it had been clear she had been trying to do something to him. It wasn't hard

to imagine the horror it would have been.

But why had that happened? It wasn't his concern now.

Leave the fight to those who want to fight.

The last time he had seen Saya, that's what Kai had said. But she had probably never come back. She didn't see herself as one of them anymore. How could he expect her to depend on weak and fallible humans? Regardless, Red Shield was finished . . . there was no way for them to continue to fight.

The kitchen light was blinding.

It wasn't the light as much as the smell that surprised David. It stunk like alcohol.

". . . What're you doing?"

"Look, and you'll see." With his back still turned to David, Kai answered gruffly.

At the boy's feet were whiskey and scotch and Zubrowka vodka bottles, all standing empty. With his right hand, he was pouring out the final bottle of Smirnoff.

The liquid that disappeared was David's nourishment. Every day, he drank it more than water.

He thought he should stop Kai, but it would have been too much work.

He kept an eye on the boy as he poured out all his liquor. Let him do what he wanted. David could go and buy more.

The empty bottle fell into the washbasin with a bang.

". . . If your dead comrades could see you now. Aren't you at all ashamed?" The boy spoke as if he could no longer stand the silence. "Could you face my father or Clara or Elizaveta looking like that? Could you see Saya or Hagi?"

He might have been trying to make David angry. But David wasn't about to get sucked into falling for the cheeky provocations of some kid.

Instead, he lifted up one of the bottles from the floor and poured the few remaining drops inside onto his tongue.

"Joel will never be able to walk again. But if he were you, he would still be fighting. Why do you think that is? Because he knows that once you give up, everything is over." The boy's voice gradually got louder and louder.

"In order to have no regrets about those who have fallen before us, he knows we must never give up. But what do *you* do? Morning, noon, and night, drink, drink, drink . . . always looking for an escape!"

"What in the hell do you know?"

Even with his back to Kai, David's grumbling was a sign of defeat. If he really had completely cast away his life, he would have had the willpower to ignore Kai's criticism.

The power in the boy's voice had disappeared, and he asked his next question quietly. "You were the one looking for a family, weren't you? Red Shield was your home. When that was gone, what happened?"

Looking for a family.

That was something David had said a long time ago, soon after he had met Saya in Okinawa. He had said it to George to relieve the pain of giving Saya back to Red Shield.

But somewhere in his heart, seeing how George loved his daughter, and how difficult it was for him to give her up, was hard for David to watch. The former military man had been duped by a civilian.

Wasn't it the same for him?

Wasn't Red Shield like his home, and David like Joel's son?

"You stupid punk . . . !"

But Kai's body was already in motion. The fact that Kai hit his mark in the frenzy was a testament to David's fatigue.

David rushed at him with his right arm outstretched, but then the boy disappeared from his view.

David quickly pulled back his arm, which had hit nothing but air, and realized he needed to lift his knee to protect his abdomen. Just as he thought that, the boy, who had ducked and stepped into his blind spot, punched him just below the ribs.

"Damn!" He couldn't breathe, and his knees buckled.

"This is the world we live in—you remember saying that? Do you even know where you are now?" The boy's words poured down on him from above his head, and as he remained down on all fours, David stared at the floor in a daze.

His gut hurt so badly that he couldn't speak, showing what a year could do to a man. The boy was no longer a boy, and David was . . . no longer a warrior.

"The world where Nahabi and Javia live. Don't you have the guts to try and fight for them?"

The connected kitchen and dining room walls were decorated with construction-paper chains and flowers hung up with tape. The next day the living room would probably be made up the same way. Then the day after that, Javia would smile and laugh as everyone sang "Happy Birthday" to her.

But David couldn't see himself joining that group. It was impossible to protect what you couldn't imagine. "I've forgotten . . ."

"David!"

A hand grabbed his collar, pulling his chin up.

The young man glared straight into David's eyes, and for the first time, David noticed how burly and fearless he had become. He wasn't the naive, immature kid David remembered.

"You used to be cool, remember?! Dammit, David!"

There was no value in throwing a punch. That's what David guessed Kai was thinking.

With a rough shake, the young man dropped him, then turned around and walked out the back door. The door slammed so hard it sounded like it might come off the hinges.

David sat for some time amid the liquor fumes. The florescent lights hurt his eyes.

He heard the floor squeak and sensed the presence of another person.

"One hook from the kid—is that all it took?"

Leaning against a post in the dining room, Gray took no pleasure in the scene before him.

"He was crying, you know. The kid."

"..."

Kai had enough respect for David's former self to make himself cry.

Tonight Kai would return to London to hunt the Chiropterans again. David stared at the empty liquor bottles and didn't say a word.

Without a doubt, Diva was there.

Speeding down the empty hallway, Moses could sense her.

The other four who followed behind him could likely tell, as well. The further they progressed, the stronger the feeling became: that dainty and repugnant smell.

At first it came as a faint song—sung in notes human ears could not detect.

The song had brought them to the Royal Opera House, a place often bustling with people, even for London. Moses and the other Schiff ignored the fact that the building was closed and entered without hesitation.

"To think, we could find her in the middle of the city like this."

"I wonder if she really plans to sing in front of people . . ." Gudrif heaped his doubts onto Moses's.

"Who knows?" There was no other response Moses could give.

Moses knew that this solemn structure, this opera house, had been held in the highest esteem throughout England's history. Several weeks later, on this very stage, the newest sensation, Diva, would be making her first public performance. This grand debut was already receiving a lot of buzz.

Because it was opera, the audience would be made up only of those who were invited. However, was that head Chevalier really going to let his queen appear live before the public?

"It's doubtful they don't know that we and Saya are targeting Diva . . ."

Passing through the pathway like the wind, the Schiff's vision instantly cleared.

In a smooth curve upward, the audience seating rose up four levels. In front of the seats on the first level they could see the performance stage.

"—I think they know." The young voice echoed through the opera house as if it were a temple. "We are already aware that when Diva sings, you will swarm to her like insects to a flame."

Standing with his back to the medieval-fortress backdrop on the stage was a young black man in a military uniform.

In the audience, a blond-haired man sat with his legs crossed. This one wore a garish frilly shirt, quite the opposite of the first man's apparel.

Moses had never seen either of them before. However, he immediately realized who they were.

"Chevaliers . . . !"

He slipped his folded scythe from under his robes and opened it to its full length.

Carmen followed suit with his three-bladed pike, and Gudrif with his long sword. Dars had his maul, and Lulu revealed her two-sided battle-ax.

"Correct. But we are not your enemy."

At the young black man's cue, the air suddenly moved.

Three shadows jumped from the upper balcony seats, landing behind the Schiff and forcing them to react quickly.

Carmen and Dars went for the Chevalier, while Moses, Lulu, and Gudrif circled the three unfamiliar enemies behind them.

"Wha-what are these guys?" Lulu's voice shook. She sensed the Chiropteran scent coming from them. Moreover, it was close to the Schiff's own odor.

The palms gripping Moses's weapon grew sweaty.

These Chiropterans were—

At a glance, they looked like modernized military troops, but

they carried no guns, and their eerie black helmets completely covered their faces.

But there was something more that was making Moses anxious. What was it?

"Say, James. What about Neesama?" The indifferent-sounding voice nabbed the attention of every member of the Schiff.

At some point, a girl in a blue dress had appeared on the stage. She was sitting atop the rather real-looking castle wall. She appeared bored, and had her hands placed together in her lap.

"Diva!" With his teeth clenched, Carmen jumped up, swinging his long pike, and at the same moment, one of the soldier-types leapt to deflect him.

Beaten to the punch, Carmen clicked his tongue.

The black Chevalier named James seemed indifferent. "I wonder if Saya will show up, too."

"Really?"

"If she was able to hear your song from earlier, she will come for sure. We will dispose of her right under your nose."

James replied respectfully, and then his face made a complete shift to stiff military mode as he looked out over the audience seating.

"You need to take care of us, first." As Moses made his boastful warning, he made a precautionary strike, but the Chevaliers appeared to have no intention of backing down.

"They aren't much of a threat, but they make good punching bags. This will be like a final performance exam for Corpse Corps."

"Corpse Corps . . . ?"

Carmen's gloomy repetition of the words was ignored by James as his lips moved calmly and disinterestedly.

"Terminate."

With that single-word command, a long silvery sword appeared in each soldier's right hand. Then the three members of the Corpse Corps began to move.

At that same moment, Moses leapt off the ground.

If they wanted a fight, that was exactly what they'd get.

Whoever was with Diva, including the Chevaliers, would be cut down here.

Carmen and Gudrif had already engaged the enemy where they stood. Group battles were the Schiff's specialty. There were no negatives to this arrangement.

Moses had plenty of time to draw his first strike on the nearest soldier in one smooth swing. Its speed rivaled that of a Chevalier, but also that of a Schiff. The Schiff's experience in battle was the advantage that would bring victory.

"We bear you no grudge, but oppose us and you must die."

The diagonal swing of his crescent moon-shaped blade cut into the soldier's head.

At least that was what he thought had happened.

He had seen the weapon slice through the figure of the military man, but by the time Moses realized it had actually only cut through a seat and the handrail behind it, the soldier had already moved closer to him.

"Wha—?!"

He had moved as if he knew how Moses would attack before even Moses did.

The soldier raised his sword, and Moses jumped backward, landing on the back of one of the audience seats. The pain in the

back of his neck amazed him. If his legs hadn't reacted in time, a second later his head would likely have been flying to the floor.

In all the chaos, this enemy was not going to give any slack.

The soldier changed directions at a right angle, but then immediately closed in, thrusting with his sword.

Moses was able to parry with his scythe and jumped straight up. He landed in the first balcony, and swung his curved blade.

The soldier, who had followed him so closely it was almost as if they were attached, blocked the swing with his long sword and spun around to Moses's rear. His movements were terribly efficient, with no wasted motion.

Moses blocked the horizontal swing coming from behind with the hilt of his sickle, and looking at the main floor below, his brethren also engaged in intense fighting.

Carmen seemed to be fighting a pretty even battle, but it was possible that his enemy wasn't giving his all. He was staying on the defense without really attacking.

"Come 'ere, you!"

Carmen's pike skewered a seat and the stuffing flew around like snow as the back of the seat collapsed. His enemy had skillfully yet barely dodged from the turning tip of the pike in order to avoid Carmen's deadly blow. Carmen was slowly being led away from the others, and the soldier was waiting for Carmen to get worn out.

"Carmen, don't chase him so far." Lulu's warning wasn't enough to reach the determined Carmen.

Gudrif and Dars had taken advantage of a two-on-one situation, but even if they had been outnumbered, it seemed like they would have been able to handle it.

If the Chevaliers were going to fight, it wasn't advantageous for the Schiff to have them wait and delay their entry into the battle. However, the two were acting as a shield at the moment, and, weakly, nothing more.

"I'll smash you to smithereens!" Dars shouted as he dropped his heavy maul downward.

The soldier hopped backward, and the blow destroyed only a row of seats. He then took advantage of the debris and dust to quickly come forward at Dars.

But that was what Dars had been counting on.

It was the perfect invitation into Gudrif's blade.

The soldier should have been sliced in two.

But he anticipated Gudrif's attack. He suddenly shifted sideways to avoid the strike and came back at Dars at an acute angle as if taunting him. Before Dars could react, the soldier was right at his chest.

The silver sword whipped around, and the hand gripping the maul was sent spinning through the air.

"Gwaaa!"

"Dars!"

Moved by anger, Gudrif swung, frantically slicing nothing but air. His target, on the other hand, deftly dodged his blade and then made his own strike. Gudrif overreached, and the result was the thick sole of an army boot planted squarely into his chest.

Gudrif's body smashed through countless rows of chairs before crash-landing into the wall.

"Damn you!" Lulu leapt high and came down on the soldier's head with her battle-ax.

He effortlessly avoided the large blade of the ax and lifted his own blade in return.

In a moment, the point of his sword would enter Lulu's chest.

"You can go to hell!" Dars had lifted up his maul with his left hand and swung it into the soldier's flank, sending him sailing sideways into the wall.

Unshaken by the first direct blow he had received, the soldier quickly pulled himself out of the caved-in wall. This Chiropteran stubbornness was a concern.

In this free-for-all, Moses became keenly aware of his mistake.

In order to get rid of the Schiff, the Chevaliers had planned this ambush.

"Not a bad strategy, wouldn't you say? Using *Mama* as bait . . ." Nathan, still sitting in the audience with his legs crossed, spoke confidently to james, who was standing onstage.

"We granted Diva her wish to sing on this stage. We could have done any number of things to draw out the Schiff."

Diva had remained in her spot. Like a bored child watching an overly long movie, she swung her legs back and forth from atop the castle wall.

"Wait. Didn't Anshel say she wasn't supposed to sing? You always listen to Mama's wishes above everything else."Nathan smiled at his own teasing, then, with a melancholy look in his eyes, he rubbed his cheek and turned to look at the battle between the Schiff and the Corpse Corps.

"As a producer, seeing the set ruined after all this work is a real shame. This is going to be a pain to clean up. The crew is not going to be happy about this one bit."

"Instead of worrying about yourself, you should be concerned with Diva's needs. If you just take off like you did when we attacked Red Shield, there's a good chance the Delta Project will be delayed even further."

"That's what—" Carmen came from behind and smashed the chair the man was sitting in to splinters.

"—you're here for."

In the blink of an eye, Nathan had his arm around James's shoulders and looked straight at his face.

His voice was no longer a feminine falsetto, but beastly deep and threatening. His steely glare was as sharp as a blade.

"..."

James blandly returned his brother's stare, and then quickly looked away.

"Oh!"

Nathan noticed it, too.

But it was too late.

Until then all the fighting had taken place below them on the floor level, so they didn't notice Moses flying down from the first balcony, sickle first, right above their heads.

"For my dead brothers and sisters—"

The Chevaliers probably didn't take the Schiff very seriously. They were cheap, imitation Chevaliers born from test tubes.

But the Schiff were wolves. And they weren't going to stop until they had put their fangs into the necks of Diva's pet dogs.

"—Look out!"

His blade flowed through the air until it cut into something hard.

Unfortunately, it wasn't the neck of a Chevalier.

A Corpse Corps soldier slipped into the space between them and stuck his foot into Moses's abdomen, sending him hurtling backward.

". . . Failed again?"

No, he had gotten the one that had gotten in the way. The soldier's carbon-fiber helmet split in two and fell to the ground, and Moses saw his face for the first time.

Moses felt a lump form in his throat.

With his mask removed, the soldier looked up at Moses.

The youthful, androgynous face was his own. It was just like looking into a mirror.

"Wha-what the hell?!"

Dars's exclamation was in reaction to seeing the soldier he had knocked through the wall step away from the rubble, without the anonymity of his now-shattered headgear. The face peering out from the opening was also, without a doubt, Moses's.

"Type Moses. The prototype with the best genetic makeup, with the ideal features carefully pruned and improved to generate the perfect Schiff. The result: Corpse Corps."

Moses listened closely to James's explanation without moving a muscle.

All these soldiers were duplicates of Moses.

The Schiff had been given life and forced to train at Kilbed in order to manufacture *these*.

". . . For this, you put us through . . ." Moses gripped the handle of his scythe so tightly the skin of his palm began to tear.

Ghee, Aurélien, Yan, Dismas, Gestas—his brothers and sisters who had fought side by side with a dream of hope.

"*This* is why we were born . . . ?" Moses felt the strength drain from his body.

"You should be proud. We recognized your extra-special abilities." Moses sensed no anger in James's matter-of-fact praise.

Moses wasn't sure if he was standing or not and couldn't remember what he was supposed to be doing. If someone had told him he was actually back in Kilbed, floating in a glass tank full of synthetic amniotic fluid, he would have believed it.

This world was too unbelievable. Too infuriating.

Why did he have to exist?

If this is what it comes down to, then I might as well . . .

With that faint desire, the deadly soldiers took a step closer to him. Moses stared at his own face with a strange hope in his heart.

It will end here.

He would join Ghee and Aurélien.

"C'mon, Moses, pull it together!"

"Dammit! This isn't the hope you believed in!"

The call from Lulu and Dars brought the light back to Moses's eyes.

But time knew no compassion.

His mirror image came down with its right-hand blade. There was no chance for escape.

The atmosphere of the opera house suddenly changed.

Moses completely forgot about the sword coming at his chest. Perhaps everyone there felt a sudden sense of impending death.

A red hurricane blew before his eyes.

The now-headless body of the perfect-model soldier spun around and collapsed next to him, his sword still posed to strike.

"Tee hee . . . I was getting tired of waiting." Excited, Diva straightened.

Reflected in her glowing blue eyes was the image of a black-haired girl lowering her naked katana.

She blew in like a gust of wind, with her back turned to Moses. He just stared at her silently.

The head of the imitation Moses sprayed blood from the severed arteries in its neck as it spun through the air. Its skin had turned white, and when it landed on the stage floor, it shattered into pieces.

The torso and limbs had also turned to stone and were breaking apart as they fellonto the floor.

"Saya! Did you come to help us?" Lulu was blocking an attack by a Corpse Corps soldier, when her lips widened into a grin. However, Saya's response was not what Lulu was expecting.

"I sensed Diva's presence. That's why I came."

". . . But, you just helped Moses!"

Saya did not turn to look at the struggling Lulu. "I simply killed a Chiropteran."

Anyone who knew the old Saya would have been shocked by this cruel demeanor, and Lulu's childish face looked perplexed.

That was when opportunity knocked.

The entangled sword and battle-ax rubbed hard against each other and Lulu slid sideways. Tempted by the movements of her enemy's exposed upper body, Lulu lunged forward.

"Yikes!"

All that saved her from getting her heart filleted and pushed out through her spine was a triple-bladed pike thrust at the enemy's flank. The soldier parried the pike attack and hopped backward.

"Don't get sloppy!" As Carmen scolded Lulu, he quickly glanced at Saya, and sneered. "Look. She doesn't need gratitude."

The look on Saya's face seemed to support Carmen's words.

"..."

Moses thought she had raised her weapon to join the Schiff in the fight.

She didn't want anything from anybody.

Maybe she was wanting—

Hagi landed on the ground next to Saya. Once he was there, she looked to the rear of the stage.

"... Diva."

From above a castle wall, probably meant to look like the Zoo, her younger sister smiled with Riku's face.

"It has been too long, Saya-neesama."

Her face looked a lot like Riku's, but her wily eyes and the sensual expression on her lips were all Diva. The slender limbs of a young teenager mysteriously matched in perfect harmony with her gorgeous boyish looks and androgynous beauty.

"You have a lot of nerve looking at me with that face . . ."

Saya glared at Diva, her low voice swirling in bitter resentment.

"What an awful thing to say. Aren't you excited to reunite with your little brother?—Saya-nee*chan*?"

It was Riku's voice.

Imitating other people's voices by manipulating the vocal cords was not beyond a Chiropteran's abilities. Diva hadn't only stolen Saya's brother's soul and looks, but his voice as well.

Saya's eyes glinted crimson.

However, Diva wasn't the only enemy there. Saya gave her a final glance, her eyes shooting dark flames at Diva before turning away.

Diva wrinkled her eyebrows as if she were confused.

". . . Neesama, it seems like you have changed more than I. You used to enjoy playing with me."

Ignoring Diva's bait, Saya turned her attention to the two men standing on the stage.

"Chevaliers . . ."

"You got it." The blond-haired one moved to the edge of the stage, and, with one hand on his hip, winked for emphasis. "I'm Nathan Mahler. The stiff over there is James Ironside. It's a pleasure to meet you, Saya. You, too, Hagi."

Nathan folded his arms and gazed brazenly at Hagi from top to bottom.

"I heard about you from Solomon, but you are a better-looking man than I imagined." Nathan narrowed his eyelids and let out a deep sigh, but Hagi only responded with disinterested silence.

It didn't seem to rub Nathan the wrong way, though. "Say, you, why not join our team? Sorry about all the fighting—let's just enjoy each other's company. What do you think?"

"What are you saying?" Instead of her attendant, Saya was the one to coldly ask the question.

"Sorry about all the fighting?" What was that supposed to mean?

The question seemed to take Nathan off guard.

"Oh, yes. I guess you don't know about it yet." Nathan's cynical smile turned toward Diva.

"Well, enough already. We're just spectators today, anyway." The tall Chevalier jumped straight up. He landed atop the set's castle walls and carefully lifted Diva into his arms. He then jumped through the open air once again.

They landed in the royal box seats of the first balcony.

"He is your partner."

Saya quickly tried to follow them, but was soon distracted by the need to escape herself.

The wooden floor was breaking into pieces under her.

A black arm that looked more like an iron post caved in the floor of the stage.

There was a moan, like the earth was straining, that vibrated her clothes and hair.

The arm pulled back out. It was attached to a giant creature with a curved back. It turned its head to look at her.

James Ironside.

The graceful young man had tossed aside his navy uniform to reveal his true Chevalier form.

Javia's birthday was the following day.

Louis had skillfully finished his part in decorating the living room, but there was still a lot left to do. He had to make the cake, but first Kai needed to go buy the ingredients.

"Flour, unsalted butter . . . do we have eggs?"

"I got them from the henhouse this morning."

As he looked over the note from Louis, Kai checked with Nahabi, who nodded proudly.

Waking up early, he had gone out in the cold to the henhouse and collected the eggs to be used in the cake. For Nahabi, who wasn't even in elementary school yet, this seemed like a pretty important job.

And coming all the way to the urban mass of London to shop for meat and vegetables, a place where the subways shook the street when they flew under your feet, was an even bigger job than that.

Was it strange that Japanese Kai knew the capital city of England much better than British citizen Nahabi? Over the last year, Kai had memorized the complete layout of every landmark from Hyde Park and the Crystal Palace to every pub selling illegal drugs in London.

"We've got all the milk, chicken, and vegetables we need here, so all we need is . . ."

"A present!"

Nahabi's voice wasn't about to be drowned out by the hustle and bustle of the shopping arcade.

It was only four o'clock in the afternoon, but the late autumn sun was already low in the sky, and London's thick fog made it feel more like night. In Covent Garden the most famous spot was the Royal Opera House, but most of the foot traffic was headed for the variety of shops along the street.

"You're right. That's the most important thing."

As they waited for the crosswalk at a street intersecting the shopping arcade, Kai tapped the much shorter boy on the top of his head.

"Stop it!"

Nahabi tried to bat away the older boy's hand, but when he looked back at Kai's smiling face, he turned and faced forward again shyly.

Kai felt that weak sort of resistance must have been a universal to younger brothers.

He was much older than Nahabi, but Riku hadn't liked it when Kai touched his head, either. From the looks of things, it didn't matter how old they were—no younger brothers liked being treated like children.

"Kai, it's green."

". . . Huh? Oh."

He hadn't noticed that the crosswalk light had changed until Nahabi told him. Kai began to walk across the pedestrian crossing.

A little way beyond the rows of shops was a medieval-style plaza. There were street performers, like the living statue, and some amusement park rides, like the Diablo. They watched the performers as the city turned from afternoon to evening.

"Shall we check out the department store for a teddy bear?"

"Javia said she wants a really big one."

"How big? Like as big as Louis?"

"Yeah."

"Then we'll need Louis to carry it home for us."

Warm-colored decorative lights had begun to come on when Kai noticed the rotund figure of their friend standing in front of the department store.

He looked up at the giant clock installed near the top of the Victorian building and saw that they had thirty more minutes

until the meeting time. As always, Louis's internal clock kept him punctual.

"Yo!" Louis spotted them and raised one hand loosely.

Kai saw a panini sandwich in that hand, and both he and Nahabi laughed.

"He couldn't find a hamburger, huh?"

"They didn't have French fries, either? We're batting zero for two."

On their way there, they had tried to guess what Louis would be snacking on while he was waiting, and both Kai and Nahabi had gotten it wrong.

Without knowing about their game, Louis must have stopped at some Italian fast-food place and picked something up. He took a bite and called out to them.

"You get everything?"

"Yeah, but we still need to get a gift."

"Just now, a white Rolls Royce went in."

Since the day the promotional DVD had arrived, Louis and Kai had been keeping a close eye on the Royal Opera House.

If Diva's live performance wasn't a joke, there was a good possibility Diva and her Chevaliers would be visiting the opera house.

They had chosen to meet in front of the department store because they could see the performance hall across the intersection from there, making it the perfect location for spying.

"Did you see Diva?"

"I couldn't tell. If the windows had been open, maybe I could have seen . . ."

If they at least knew how many people they were up against, it would be a big help, but that was a luxury they did not have. With Red Shield gone, and almost no manpower, things were a lot more difficult than they once had been.

"I see . . . OK, can you take care of Nahabi?"

This is where they would switch places. Louis and Nahabi would go into the department store to find a present. Kai would spend his time watching the front door of the Royal Opera House.

"Let's meet back here in two hours."

"All right."

Nahabi listened to the adults talk with a bored look on his face. Louis took him by the hand and turned to walk through the entrance of the department store. Kai watched Louis's large frame pass through the revolving door, then walked to a nearby sidewalk café.

It was cold out, and not many customers were seated outside. The Royal Opera House was situated between two roads, and Kai chose a table where he could see it clearly. It was just as he pulled out the chair to sit down that it happened.

Two shadows landed on the roof of the Roman-style entrance.

They were difficult to see in the dusky night sky, but they definitely weren't birds.

Judging from their silhouettes, one was tall, and the other one was much shorter. Despite the way they had leapt from building to building, they appeared to be human.

". . . Saya?"

Without thinking, Kai took out the binoculars tucked away in his jacket, surprising the waitress who was just bringing him his menu. Kai jumped to the sidewalk.

If those shadows were Saya and Hagi, then Diva was inside the opera house.

Pushing past slow-moving passersby, Kai broke into a sprint.

The blade cut into the palm of her left hand, and a small stream of blood began to flow out.

Saya lifted her sword horizontally to shoulder height and lowered her hips. Her bent knees straightened like an unleashed spring.

She had waited to strike until the coal-skinned monster had swung his giant arms.

She easily slipped between them and stepped into her enemy's chest.

"Hyaaa!" The cry swelled from the depths of her gut, as she drove her sword forward with all her might.

ging—

A high-pitched sound, like a bronze bell ringing, echoed back from the ceiling. No, even if it had been copper, the strike should have been a good one.

However, Saya saw not the smallest scratch on his left arm, which had blocked the sword.

Hard.

Saya felt the vibrations resonate into the bones of her hands and she bit her lip.

Including Chevaliers, she had sliced up countless numbers of Chiropterans. However, she had never before encountered one so tenacious, with skin and muscle like steel.

His left arm tensed with power and countered Saya's attack.

Without resisting, Saya deftly moved out of his arm's path and spun around to his side, with a clear path to his neck. But the ultra-hard skin covering his arm blocked her way.

No matter how many blows she landed, it was doubtful she could do any damage to the thick shell of his left arm.

Saya squinted at the sparks shooting into the air, and once again hopped back to retreat.

Not about to let an opportunity slip by, James came at her with both arms stretched forward.

"Saya!"

Hagi came running toward her from the side and struck the side of the Chevalier's head with his cello case.

The creature staggered from the blow, barely touching Saya's side as he plunged into the castle wall. The paper set came crashing down, and, with it, plaster, wood, and iron pipe.

Even if it had been a real castle wall, James would probably have crushed it like it was made of paper.

The fake stones cracked and crumbled as he turned his body around. Saya could see no signs of cuts or injuries.

When your enemy's defense is an iron wall, the moment there is a crack in the surface, you must attack that opening with all your might. It wasn't magnificent, but it was an extremely efficient strategy. The weight of his body was a significant weapon on its own.

Saya couldn't wait for her enemy to stand up before she made her move.

His upper body was so low to the ground, he could have licked the floor, and at just the right moment Saya jammed the tip of her sword into the back of his neck.

The katana met with hard resistance.

"Unhh . . ."

Her blade was barely able to break the surface of his shell-like skin. It wasn't only his arm—the entire outer surface of his body was shielded in the strong but elastic skin.

"Don't waste your time."

The Chevalier's voice was muffled. "I know your blood will kill me. But, if you can't cut me, it doesn't matter."

James tried to grasp Saya between both arms.

Saya jumped into the air. As his two armored hands crashed together, she landed on his arms and sprang up once again. She twisted in the air, landing on his shoulder. Shifting to an underhand grip, she stabbed her katana into the base of his head, where his spine met his skull.

Even creatures with armored exoskeletons have places on their bodies that aren't completely protected—but even if James had such a weak point, that spot at the base of his skull wasn't the place.

James turned and snatched Saya with his right hand like an eagle.

"Yaah!"

He squeezed her breath out and then tossed her into the audience. Saya rolled sideways, smashing several rows of seats.

Both the Chiropterans with Moses's face and the Schiff they were fighting looked at Saya with surprise, but they were too busy with their own battle to respond. Saya was in the same situation.

Standing up, Saya brushed the wood splinters off her clothes and ignored the cotton stuffing falling like snow all around her. Her gaze was focused solely on her enemy standing on the stage.

Hagi used his cello case to defend himself from James's wild two-armed attack. Saya was preparing to jump to Hagi's side when she noticed someone looking down at her from the VIP seats on the first balcony.

Their eyes met, and Diva turned away with a start.

"We're going home."

"What? Already?" Nathan's short response was a result of his surprise at Diva's sudden change in mood.

"This isn't fun anymore."

She stood up from the regal seat and turned toward the exit.

"Also, Saya-neesama's face is scary today."

"It is. And you can't eat the driver, you know. We have plenty of *snacks* waiting back at the castle."

Nathan remained in his seat as he gave his warning, but at that point Diva had already disappeared from Saya's view.

"Diva . . . !"

Saya's teeth clenched tight. She wanted to follow her, but first she had to finish things with the enemy at hand. And then there was another Chevalier on top of that.

James clenched both hands into fists and brought down the two giant iron orbs toward Hagi's head.

Hagi raised his cello case at an angle, but the strength of the blow resonated through his body, causing the floor beneath his feet to crack.

"Try to stop me, and you'll pay with your life!"

Backed by all the power from the muscles in his back and shoulder, James thrust his right arm at Hagi.

No matter how strong the cello case was, Hagi did not have the strength to match a strike of that power.

As if he were lighter than air, the young man's body careened through space and crashed into the set at the edge of the stage.

The gigantic opera house rumbled, and the lights in the ceiling shook.

From the unrelenting cloud of smoke and dust rose Hagi, coughing. His fall had been broken by a now-crooked marble pillar. He retched blood onto the stage floor, and one of his knees was clearly broken.

"Hagi!"

"Worrying about the servant and forgetting the battle. Amateur."

Taken aback, Saya looked back at the front of the stage to see James crouched down preparing to leap. A shower of sparks danced around his shoulders.

Before James could turn his head to investigate, another succession of gunshots rang out, and flashes of metal on metal spotted his body.

"Aha! The knight arrives to rescue our heroine from peril." Nathan looked down at the stage with a revived enthusiasm.

Standing next to the kneeling Hagi was a young man surrounded by wisps of gunpowder smoke. He was holding a pistol in both hands.

"Kai . . ."

Saya gritted her teeth against the sudden flood of memories.

He must have heard about Diva's performance and been watching the opera house. But it was reckless for him to suddenly throw himself into the battle. He knew what the chances were for a human fighting a Chiropteran: the only choices were to wait it out or to die.

Saya's blood flowed through her veins so that this very situation would never be repeated.

Why couldn't Kai resist involving himself in the most dangerous of battles? He had lost the most important people in his life and had been beaten and injured over and over, so he should have had no reason to risk losing even more . . .

"Shit. They aren't penetrating. The igniter is the same as a normal bullet, then."

Kai efficiently switched magazines on the pistol and quickly examined his surroundings on the stage.

"Saya, can you keep that one from moving?"

". . ."

"Please!" Without waiting for her answer, Kai began to move, his pistol gripped in his hands.

There weren't a lot of options. Following Kai's plan meant attacking the Chevalier. If all Kai wanted was for James to stay in one place, that would be relatively simple.

Saya jumped up, and kicked off one of the seats, sending herself flying back.

Just as she landed on the stage, James swung a giant angry fist down at her.

His fist smashed through the floor with ease, and Saya turned to wrap one arm around his elbow, rotating her body into his chest with her katana positioned to strike.

"Not possible."

So confident was James in the strength of his own flesh, he was actually allowing her to take a strike at him. But he wasn't the target of Saya's sword.

As Saya rotated around, she cut an arc through the floor, causing the oversized beast to stumble.

"What . . . ?!"

Below the stage was a deep, cavernous space. It held the machinery that rotated the stage and space for the crew to prepare sets during a performance. Saya hadn't known it was there, but after seeing Hagi's feet sink into the stage after James's attack, she had realized that the floor of the stage wasn't reinforced with concrete or metal.

The tearing boards screeched as James's body sank. The dense mass of his giant body was working against him.

It was then that Kai started firing.

His shots were not aimed at the lower half of the monster, but it seemed like bullets were crashing into the ground. Saya looked to see that Kai had pointed the muzzle toward the ceiling.

Several wires in the ceiling snapped and undulated like black whips.

The metal frame holding the large-scale lighting system stuttered and then began to fall.

Just after Saya had quickly leapt to the side, she saw James look up with his red eyes, before his body was crushed by the huge metal framework.

With a thunderous boom, chunks of wood went flying in all directions, and all the dust from under the floor blew upward in a gray cloud.

"Well . . . ?"

Kai hadn't lowered his pistol. He wasn't taking his chances with this Chevalier.

Saya also held her weapon at the ready with her right hand and covered her mouth and nose with her left to keep from breathing in too much dust.

She had little confidence that they had defeated the enemy. She wouldn't be sure until she had pierced his body. And she couldn't ignore the fact there was still one more Chevalier, plus the Schiff fighting the other Chiropterans, to contend with.

These thoughts only barely distracted her from the enemy before her.

Poom! A wave rose up, undulating the stage.

With the oscillation, the boards in the stage spit out the nails holding them down, and the surface of the stage split and scattered like fallen leaves.

Saya's instincts told her to move away, and just as she reached the edge of the stage, an explosion roared from the floor behind her.

The giant beast lumbered up as if rising out of water, and its eyes didn't seem to immediately grasp Saya's location.

Saya turned around as she slit her right arm with her katana and held the cut to her mouth.

"Graaa . . . !"

In a single moment pain swept through her, strong enough that she clenched her teeth so hard they nearly cracked, and, gripping her sword in her left hand, she lept toward his eyes. That was the place that wasn't invulnerable. Her fingertips slid deep into his eye sockets.

He thrashed like a wild carnivore, baring his fangs and throwing his head back at its intended prey.

Saya was thrown back, and her body cleared all the seats, stopping only when she reached the rear wall.

The wall was pulverized as if it had been hit by an artillery shell.

"Saya?!"

Fighting alongside Carmen, Lulu turned to see what had happened.

However, the Schiff didn't have the luxury of worrying for long about anyone but themselves. Their weapons clanged against their enemies' swords. Lulu eyeballed the stairs above the ground-level seats—or maybe she was thinking about dashing straight up the wall.

Saya coughed and tasted blood. She pushed her way out of the rubble and stood up on her knees.

"My . . . arm."

The muscles and tendons of her right arm had torn, and she could barely move her fingertips. The constant stream of blood was soaked up by the dusty carpet. Somehow, she had managed not to lose her katana, but she didn't feel she could grip it with her right hand.

She held the sword with her left hand, and rubbed her back as she stood all the way up.

"Saya! Above you!"

Hearing Kai's warning, Saya looked up to see the unimaginable. James had jumped through the air and was barreling down right on top of her.

There was no escape.

To prevent a fatal attack, she needed to protect her head. She could face a heart-stopping blow to the chest or a gouging slice to the abdomen. Those kinds of attacks wouldn't kill her.

She would have to take some destruction to her body for the chance to finish this enemy. If she could get close enough to him to stab him in the eye, she was sure her blade would go through his cranium. With a sword covered in her poisonous blood, he would meet his death.

Saya made her decision at the last moment. She would allow her body to be ravaged by his claws in order to wait for the opportune moment.

But that moment never came.

Hagi's back appeared in front of Saya.

He would have sacrificed his body for hers, but the enemy's claws did not find their way to him.

"What are you doing, Nathan?" James's voice had always sounded cold and mechanical. It was the first time Saya had heard him speak in an obviously angry tone.

His claws grazed Hagi's flank and Saya's chest, but were restrained, caught in the grips of another Chevalier.

"I changed my mind. There's no audience here today, and this isn't the appropriate place for our bride to die."

Like he was tossing a kitten a snack, Nathan opened his palm to release his brother's wrist. With both feet planted firmly on the ground, James peered down at Nathan with a sinister look in his eye.

"How dare you?! I don't need to heed your every whimsy!"

Even brothers of Diva's blood had lines they couldn't cross with each other. That much was clear from the rage in James's voice.

Nathan laughed.

His sarcastic snigger couldn't have come at a more inappropriate time. He certainly was brazen.

"So, what do you plan to do? Are you going to shut me up with that hand? *I will*—" Nathan laughed again, punctuating his words, and stepped closer, bringing his face to James's. "*—kill you.*"

Even Saya felt like her stomach was suddenly stuffed with ice.

James's limbs drooped as if they were attached to chains.

The tension between the two Chevaliers staring each other down was intense, and soon something had to snap.

Several seconds passed.

Finally, it was the dark-armored monster that backed down.

". . . I leave it up to you."

"There, there, that's a good boy."

The rage in the monster had completely vanished. Nathan patted his shoulder as if he were a child that had lost his temper, and James's body hunched lower.

Nathan looked at Saya.

Hagi raised his right hand, showing that he hadn't let his guard down, but the blond Chevalier didn't seem to notice as he smiled at Saya.

"I will prepare the proper stage for you and Diva sometime soon. See you at the next performance."

In a burst of wind, Nathan flew up and out of the first balcony exit.

Her instincts made her want to follow the enemy, but her intense agony forced her to stop. The injuries to her arm had already begun to heal, but several of her ribs felt like they were still broken.

"Saya, can you stand up?"

"I'm OK."

She slid her katana into the scabbard Hagi held out to her.

James and the other Chiropterans had already left the performance hall. Today's battle was over. They hadn't been able to kill Diva.

Kai put his pistol inside his jacket as he walked between the seats toward her.

"Saya—"

Just as he was about to say something, an anguished scream echoed from the ceiling.

"Dars! No!"

It was Lulu.

"You can't die here all alone!"

The shorn-headed Schiff lay on the floor, and his sister rocked his chest with both hands.

"... Sorry. You are going to have to let me go." Dars answered her slowly, his voice crackling like radio static.

Saya could see that his face and the skin exposed by his torn robes were covered with reddish cracks. It was just like Aurélien. The Thorn was choking his life away.

The Schiff had seen this again and again. Moses and Carmen watched silently. Lulu was the only one not prepared to accept the truth.

"That's enough. Let him go in peace." It was the tall, long-haired Gudrif who laid a hand on Lulu's shoulder.

Lulu turned to respond in protest, but her face froze.

"Gudrif . . ."

He had red fissures running across his face. His hair had already begun to crystallize, and his skin peeled in places. It

wasn't only Dars, but Gudrif whose life was being pulled from him.

"It looks like the journey ends here for the two of us. I regret not getting to pay Diva back, but I have no regrets about fighting alongside all of you."

". . . I know . . . we all feel the same way." It took Moses a few moments to squeeze out his words, and Gudrif smiled.

Pieces of dead white skin peeled off and fell to the floor. Despite standing on the brink of death, Gudrif looked oddly refreshed.

"Moses, Carmen, Lulu . . . stay alive as long as you can."

His final words to his siblings hung in the air, and Gudrif's body began to lose all energy.

His body slowly leaned forward, and Moses quickly caught him and helped him lie down on the floor. His breathing was already very shallow, and his dry and brittle body began to crack into pieces.

Dars's body was falling apart in the same fashion, and the clothes he wore collapsed all at once.

Moses took the exposed red pieces of their bodies and placed them under their respective cloaks. It looked to Saya as if he were sheltering their very souls.

"We will never forget you two."

Moses spoke with strength and then stood up.

Carmen was clearly upset and hung his head low, and Lulu wept quietly but openly.

And then there were three.

The once-large group was now reduced to the three remaining here. Battling against their own fate, this was their reward. And

yet, even if that was true, they refused to wait quietly for Death to come calling.

Moses looked up at Saya, and she could see that his eyes were dry. They showed an unwavering determination which Saya thought looked beautiful.

"You helped us out of a rough spot back there."

". . . I only came here to kill Diva."

"Even still, if you hadn't come, we all might have been killed. I give my thanks."

Moses's gracious and dutiful words actually stung Saya. She looked down and shook her head.

Seeing the remains of Gudrif and Dars reminded Saya of when Aurélien had died. "That time, and now . . . I couldn't do anything to help."

Saya didn't look at Moses's face as she turned her back to him. She didn't want him to see that the agony in her heart was much greater than the pain in her ribs.

She needed to find Diva.

Kai followed Saya out the rear entrance to the Royal Opera House.

He wasn't going to allow another meeting between them to end with her running away before they had a chance to talk.

"Saya, wait!"

Her injuries likely hadn't fully healed. Saya's legs looked heavy as they carried her toward a dark alley.

"You're in pain, aren't you? Louis's car is right over there. We can take care—"

Saya's action stopped him in midsentence.

Hagi leaned over toward Saya, exposing his throat, and she put a hand on his shoulder. Her lips parted, revealing two sharp fangs which she brought down into his neck.

Hagi's body convulsed like a carnivore's prey, suffocating as its life is squeezed away.

That was the necessary routine of the animal world, a completely emotionless act. They had likely repeated this process many times. That they weren't even trying to hide it from Kai caused him to feel a sort of hopelessness.

Saya had clung so persistently to the idea that she was human . . .

Her white throat moved as she swallowed the liquid she sucked from his neck, and Kai saw the now-calm look on Hagi's face and forced himself to turn away.

Darkness fell over the two like lovers in an embrace.

After a few moments, Saya pulled her fangs from Hagi's neck, and red threads of blood stretched from his throat to her lips.

She carelessly wiped the blood from her mouth with the back of her hand and spoke coldly.

"I'm fine now. My injuries will soon heal."

"Yeah, but . . ."

"Don't worry about me. If you get too close to me, Kai, you too will—" With those words Saya's even tone wavered. A crack in her mask was revealed, and from that opening, her true feelings crept out.

Kai had confirmed his suspicions.

Saya hadn't changed. She was the Saya he knew. She didn't want anyone else to die as a result of her battle.

Hagi turned his gaze toward the main street.

Kai placed a hand on the gun inside his jacket but soon let his arm fall back down. A pedestrian had turned into the alley.

"There you are, Kai!"

It was a young boy carrying a flat-bottomed shopping bag and speaking in a tone that didn't fit the situation. It was Nahabi.

Kai looked up at Louis, who was holding Nahabi's hand, with a critical eye.

"What are you doing, bringing Nahabi here?"

"I can't just leave him alone on the streets of London, can I?"

Of course, Louis was right, but it would have probably been safer for the two of them to wait at the meeting place. Besides the danger that Diva might come back, there was no reason to enter the scene so clumsily.

Louis had a Japanese-style crepe he must have bought at the department store hanging out of his mouth, and he raised a hand in greeting to Hagi and Saya.

"Hey, you two. Looks like there's no more need for us to keep an eye on this place."

"What do you mean?"

"Diva's performance has been canceled."

Both Kai and Saya caught their breaths at Louis's words.

"... Is that really true?"

"Yeah. I just saw it broadcast on a television inside the department store. They said they were refunding all tickets sold for her scheduled performances in Europe. Only the final performance at the Metropolitan hasn't been cut."

"Are they doing it for Diva's safety?"

This sounded very much like a Chevalier's decision. Considering the timing, the news had come too quickly. Less than an hour earlier, Saya had made her plans for Diva clear inside the performance hall.

"They know Saya is alive."

As always, Louis's guess was right on the money. They had figured out that she was here from the Chiropteran corpses in London, and quickly decided to cancel the performances. That must have been it.

But if that were true, then the Chevaliers were trying to turn the tables on Saya, luring her here before she got the drop on Diva. They had already decided to cancel her performances. The purpose of the performance was to set a trap, and that was the only part they had followed through on.

"How is it, Saya? It's not really easier looking for Diva on your own, is it? I think it would be better if we joined forces again."

Kai couldn't help but agree with Louis's words. "Come home, Saya. Let's fight together."

Her only response was a cold look.

"I don't need your help anymore. This is my fight. I am tired of mourning."

Her eyes rejected any cooperation or support, revealing both a strength in her desire to work alone, and a weakness in her fear of hurting someone again.

She turned away, giving up like a child would.

"Won't she come to Javia's birthday party?"

Saya seemed completely unprepared for Nahabi's question. This was Saya's first encounter with the boy.

"Javia's a little girl whose house we're staying at now. She turns five tomorrow." Kai explained.

"She said she wanted a teddy bear, but they were all out at the store. Louis said a bunny would be OK, but what do you think?"

Nahabi obviously considered this to be a serious issue. Then, he started to laugh.

"Won't you come? You're friends with Kai and Louis, aren't you? We are going to go home and make a giant cake. There'll be enough for you, too."

"Ye-yeah." Holding a conversation with a child, Saya answered reflexively, without thinking. Nahabi fearlessly walked up to her and grasped her hand.

"That's a promise, right?"

"Sure . . . OK, then."

Saya pulled her hand back, probably fearful that Nahabi would notice all the dried blood on her skin. Nahabi looked at her suspiciously, but since she had accepted his invitation, his lips soon curled into a smile.

"We'll all be waiting for you!"

". . ."

With her lips sealed shut, she turned to make her way down the dark alley, Hagi in tow. Kai didn't try to stop her.

He knew he would see her the following evening.

03

THE CORPSE CORPS returned one member short.

"After all the careful work we did through the performance tests, we really can't have our valuable goods trashed like that."

Van Argeno looked at the container and furrowed his eyebrows.

The monitor relaying the scene from the interior of the container didn't give the whole story. The bed of one member of the Corpse Corps remained empty.

"How about the other two?"

"It is clear they participated in a rather brutal exchange. Analyzing their regeneration data, their bodies have been engaging in some pretty serious reconstruction."

With a tablet PC in one hand, the American researcher who had come from Okinawa relayed the details.

Now he was a veteran, second in command to Van on the Delta Project. When the project had transferred from Cinq Flèche to Goldsmith, requests had been made from the American side, and he had been transferred as well.

It was either a show of confidence from the superpower backing him, or a transfer forced on him out of spite. Regardless, he

was completely dedicated to the project, and Van utilized him to his maximum potential.

". . . Is there something?"

"Yes. Lately Professor Collins has been reading data without permission and has been making complaints behind my back. He's very picky about the details."

"Uh . . . yeah . . ."

Not sure how to respond, the researcher quickly clammed up. Seeing the sweat form at his brow made Van laugh.

"No disrespect. It's just casual talk."

Van pulled a piece of candy from his breast pocket and looked back into the container, letting out a deep sigh.

"Be that as it may, I wonder what sort of beings they were fighting against . . ."

Van wanted to hear James's eyewitness report right then and there, but James served in the U.S. Navy, and answered to Anshel. Van did what he could to not offend him. He wasn't completely confident that business dealings with someone as unsociable as James would go smoothly, but only time would tell.

"Anyway, as luck would have it, Professor Collins delivered us a new product, but it's little consolation."

Inside the next container down, delivered only a few hours before from Zone Z of the research facility, were brand-new Corpse Corps, likely still sleeping.

They were done with the experimental-grade Corpse Corps, and the production line had already begun. They weren't intended for only the U.S. and England, but for clients from all over the world. This is where Van's talents came in.

"All right, will you please check on the condition of our new arrivals?"

"Yes, sir."

The researcher immediately got to work on his notepad computer, touching the screen with a stylus. Then, he abruptly looked toward the storeroom entrance.

"Is that . . . a friend of yours, Van?"

"Hn?" Van was unwrapping some candy when his eyes followed the gaze of the researcher. He saw a figure come down the stairs next to the giant shutter door, and the candy slipped from his fingers.

Into the laboratory, with the latest technology and equipment, entered a man who didn't belong.

He was approximately twenty years old and his jet-black tailcoat was covered with a velvet cape. Van had a clear memory of the Asian-looking man with the graceful face.

"Karl . . . ?!"

There was no question. It was the head of Cinq Flèche Pharmaceuticals' Vietnam branch, Karl Fei-Ong.

Van had heard no news of Karl since he had last seen him in the jungle of Vietnam. At that time, Karl's body hadn't been in human form, but rather that of a "mouse." What was this man doing in these facilities now? He was a Cinq Flèche high executive, but only individuals directly involved in this project were allowed access.

"Wha-what are you doing here?" Aware of his own nervousness, Van straightened his tie and spoke in as overbearing a manner as he could muster. When he had worked for Solomon he had kept a polite distance from Karl, as the two seemed to be close,

but now that Van was under Anshel, he had no reason to be nervous. Besides, Van was in charge of this research facility.

"I do not remember giving you permission to enter. Exit the way you came." Despite his attempt to stay dignified, Van's voice cracked as he spoke.

He was talking not to a man, but to a monster.

Karl did nothing to indicate that he had heard Van. He walked down the stairs as if he were walking into his own home, went up to the container nearest the door, and gently moved his right arm.

His cape flew open and the double doors of the container were torn away and tossed aside as if they were made of papier-mâché.

"He . . ."

Almost as if it were choreographed, both Van and the researcher dropped to their knees at the same time. The doors spun in the air, smashing into the wall of the storeroom with a tremendous clang.

"—All right! Let the party begin!"

Obviously excited for what he hoped was about to take place, Karl's grin stretched wide across his face.

"A birthday party?"

Mao looked around the living room at the decorations and put both hands on her hips.

Louis came in from the kitchen and placed food on the table before looking at the guests.

The table was already crowded with food, as if it were Christmas dinner. There were potato salad, roast chicken,

lamb chops, sardines, french fries, caesar salad, slices of ham and fruit on crackers, mushroom pizza, squid-ink paella, German-style sausage, and potato soup. Louis had made it all by hand; a kaleidoscope of European delights. And of course, he had prepared glasses of champagne and poured ginger ale for the kids.

The room was warm thanks to the heater, and a mouthwatering aroma flowed through the air.

"I didn't know. We look like real jerks for not bringing anything."

From behind Mao stepped in another guest, Okamura, his arms spread wide.

"Presents aren't always things, you know. Maybe a song would be nice. With feeling now, 'Happy birthday to—'"

"No, thank you!" Javia stuck her fingers in her ears, ending Okamura's recital just before the three-second mark.

As the tone-deaf reporter fell silent, Louis, who had made countless trips from the kitchen to the living room, walked in carrying the final dish.

"OK, Javia. Here comes your cake!"

"Wow! It's giant!"

"It's not only for you, you know!"

Javia wrapped herself around Kai's leg, and peered closely at the huge shortcake as Nahabi issued her a warning. Even with her big brother's prodding, a kid will be a kid. After Louis, the energetic Javia had the largest appetite in the house.

With little sisters who loved food that much, older brothers were often forced to break into a cold sweat. Kai had experienced it before, too, and felt for Nahabi.

Once Saya had arrived the Miyagusuku home, the dinner table had become a very noisy place.

"Time to light the candles."

Gray waited for everyone to sit down before pulling out a lighter. Five candles stuck out of the fresh cream frosting.

It was then that they heard the dog howling outside the front door.

"Sounds like we have another guest."

"I'll look."

Gray stood up from his chair, but Nahabi sped down the hallway ahead of him.

"You're late! Everyone's here, so you are last."

Kai heard the sound of the door opening, and Nahabi's excited but critical voice.

Soon he was back in the living room, turning back toward the hallway to the front door. He was pulling the arm of his hesitant guest, forcing her into the room.

"C'mon. Hurry!"

Kai met the girl, much older than the little boy barking orders at her, with a big smile.

It was Saya.

Hagi was not with her, and she held her katana to the ground in her left hand. It was what she had in her right hand that captured Javia's attention. It was a giant teddy bear.

Javia didn't go toward Saya. She looked wary of this stranger and hid behind Kai. Children were sensitive and couldn't help but be honest. It was possible she smelled death on the sword Saya carried and on the stains on her clothes.

Saya stopped.

The uncomfortable silence was again broken by a child. "Why are you being shy? She came here for your birthday."

Hearing Nahabi's words, Javia poked her head out from behind Kai and looked Saya over. She moved into the open and took a step forward.

Saya slowly kneeled down and held out the stuffed animal.

"So . . . Happy birthday."

With that single sentence Saya probably realized what she was actually doing there. Gradually, a smile rose on Javia's face.

She rushed toward Saya, and threw her arms around the stuffed bear that was almost as big as she was. Her cheeks were flushed as she looked up at Saya.

"Thank you!"

Pulling herself away from Javia's bright face, Saya stood up.

"Well, then, I'll be going . . ."

"Wait." Gray placed a bony hand on Saya's shoulder. "The present is very nice, but having just one more guest to celebrate her birthday would make her even happier. Know what I mean?"

With Gray's words, Javia's eyes glistened hopefully.

"If you are leaving to be polite, don't even think about it. Any friend of Louis and Kai's is a friend of ours."

"He's right, Saya. And I've made so much food you'll scream." Louis pointed out his handmade dishes with pride.

Irritated with Saya's silence, Mao stood up. She picked up an unused chair resting by the wall and carried it to the table, close to where Saya was standing.

"Don't worry, just sit down. I wanted to get the chance to talk with you, anyway." Mao took Saya by the hand and left her little choice but to sit. It might have been a little crude, but that was the kind of reception you got from Mao.

As Javia quickly made her way to one side and Mao started talking from the other, sandwiching Saya in the middle, Kai realized something.

Regardless of what Saya thought, many people cared about her. This might have been a big burden, but it was helpful at times, too.

Realizing there wasn't a drop of scotch in his silver flask, David smacked his lips as the stench of liquor hung in the still of night.

A wave of nausea swept through his system, and without thinking, he fell hands first to the floor.

There was nothing in his stomach for him to vomit, so he just spat up mucus over and over again. Gradually, he was able to sit up, and he leaned his back against the barn wall when his legs gave out again.

Thanks to the alcohol, he didn't feel the cold, but from the woods behind the house, he could hear the incessant sound of buzzing insects.

A warm light shone from the farmhouse windows.

At this moment, Javia was probably surrounded by everyone wishing her a happy birthday in the living room. David could not imagine himself participating in that sort of normal family scene.

He had had absolutely no trouble taking care of himself when he was fighting the Chiropterans. But now he had no clue what to do. He had no idea how normal people lived.

Since coming to the farm, David had fully realized that the only thing he knew was battle. When a person with such an unbalanced lifestyle abandoned the only thing he knew, what would happen to him?

The answer was simple. He would turn into garbage.

It was then David realized there was someone standing next to the pile of firewood stacked against the barn's wall.

He tossed away the flask and quickly reached toward his chest.

The pistol handle that should have been there wasn't, and all he grasped was air. He remembered that he was unarmed. At the same time, he realized the person was not his enemy and the tension in his shoulders subsided.

"You . . ."

He looked at the silky face of the young man carrying a cello case on his back.

"If it isn't the man who up and disappeared right in the middle of a mission."

Hagi didn't respond. He just stood in the same place, in complete silence.

The insects chirping in the overgrown weeds and the cows resting in the barn were indifferent to his presence. To them, he was nothing more than a nighttime breeze.

". . . It sure is strange. Doesn't matter if it's Okinawa, or Russia, or the bloody deck of a ship, you somehow fit yourself right in. It's like you just appear right out of thin air."

David peered at Hagi's handsome face. It felt like he always had and always would be fixed to that spot. The insects and animals, and maybe even the plants and trees, accepted him as if he belonged there.

"It's a means of survival." Hagi answered without changing his expression, and David laughed.

"Don't be sarcastic. You don't know how to take a compliment."

"You seem to be out of place, David."

Taken by surprise, David fumbled for an answer.

That might have been the very first time Hagi had addressed David by name. The young man with the long life had never shown much interest in other people.

"... Yeah. I don't fit in anywhere."

"I wasn't being sarcastic."

"It's fine." He knew Hagi hadn't been joking.

"Have you given up fighting?"

"Yeah. I traded my gun in for this."

Hagi looked frankly at the empty flask. "You don't appear to be enjoying yourself."

"What're you? My counselor?"

The irritation in David's voice didn't seem to bother Hagi. "No. It was just my impression."

"..."

No matter what he said, David felt Hagi could see straight through to his soul. He didn't follow bluffs or jests. He was a trusted ally on the battlefield, but David wondered if he was just annoying now.

No, it had to be the other way around.

David sneered at himself silently.

Could people who waste their lives fighting actually keep themselves from sinking when they found themselves in a normal, everyday life? Naturally, there was nothing he could do. He didn't fit in anywhere. Not even in the garbage.

He had completely given up, but he couldn't throw himself away.

Recognizing this, more than anything, David was afraid. When Kai had punched him, and when he had faced Joel, and right now, talking to Hagi, he felt some fragment of purpose pierce his heart.

What would rescue him from his pain wasn't the alcohol. He knew what it was he needed—

Hagi turned his head and looked in a different direction. David saw his pupils rapidly dilate.

"What's wrong?"

"They followed Saya's scent."

It appeared that an unwanted guest was about to crash the party.

Her sigh fell to the floor like a stone.

Saya rested both hands on the edge of the kitchen sink and drooped her head low.

Nothing was wrong with her physically. And yet, she felt like something was lodged in her chest, making it difficult for her to breathe.

At her seat at the party, Mao had been asking her all sorts of questions and Nahabi and Javia had wanted to play Japanese cat's cradle and she had clapped to Okamura's mediocre singing. Nothing that she could call painful.

It was the exact opposite.

Being with everyone together brought back so many memories. Kaori, and Riku, and George, and the days when they lived together in Okinawa.

She couldn't allow herself fall back onto that comfortable net. Just tasting that life again would make going back into isolation that much harder, and she would likely lose the will to fight. It was that fear that had driven Saya from the bright and noisy living room.

She shouldn't have come.

She and Hagi shared the same blood. He was her family. They had fought beside each other for a hundred years. He was the only one she could share everything with. There was no other person she could imagine fighting at her back.

"Saya."

She didn't need to turn around to know it was Kai.

"She thinks you are probably lonely . . ."

Hearing these words, Saya slowly straightened her back and spotted Javia peeking in the doorway behind Kai.

The moment their eyes met, Javia tried to suppress a giggle that got the best of her.

Saya was ashamed that a child barely five years old would be concerned about her. Louis and Mao knew her well. But that made it even more painful.

"Everyone is really happy you came today."

Kai spoke as if he could clearly read the conflict in her heart.

And he continued. His voice was calm. It no longer had that sharp resonance of youth. Losing as much as he had, maybe he had gained something else.

"Remember that time back in Okinawa, when Dad baked a cake for no reason? Actually, that was meant for your birthday. But then, the cake was a disaster."

Kai laughed quietly at the memory.

Saya hadn't forgotten that day, either. Riku had said that the French-style Yule log cake looked more like a salamander, and Saya couldn't forget its spongy texture, with too much cocoa added.

". . . But Father made so many good meals for us, too."

The cake had been a failure, but George was the chef of the house and usually loved showing off his skills in the kitchen.

"Yeah, that was a lot of fun."

"That time seems like a dream to me now."

Except the time she had spent at the Zoo—no, even including that time—Saya's year in Okinawa had been the happiest time of her life.

"But, now that's—"

"That's what I was thinking." Kai's words forcibly interrupted Saya's. "What is it we are fighting for?"

". . ."

Silence was the best answer Saya could give. At the same time, she thought about Kai's motive for fighting. Revenge for his father and brother. That might have been part of it.

Yet, seeing him for the first time in a year, he was much more of an adult than he had been before. Those driven only by hate didn't have the calm bravery she saw in his eyes now.

"I remembered something as I was staying here watching Javia and Nahabi. We used to laugh like they do."

Kai sighed audibly and his eyes moved from the cupboard next to the sink to Saya's face.

"Can't you come back?"

Without hiding his feelings, Kai asked Saya directly.

Saya looked down to see a pile of dirty dishes and forks and broken eggshells. They had been born into normal lives. They made food, they ate, then they did the dishes.

She could hear everyone chatting cheerfully in the living room.

". . . It's because I am a Chiropteran."

She couldn't return to human life. She was restricted to her fight against the monsters.

"—Saya." The faint call vibrated in her eardrum like plucked string.

Saya's eyes grew wide.

There was no mistaking this voice.

"Chevaliers . . . !"

She picked up the sword she had leaned against the sink and hurried out the back door.

"Wait, Saya!"

"Stay in the house, Kai!"

She sensed more than one Chiropteran near the farmhouse. She might not be able to handle them all alone.

However, she could not allow any of the people inside the house to get caught in the battle.

It was obvious they were targeting her. And so she needed to leave, put distance between herself and the house. That was her first order of business.

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The night breeze caressed the gently sloping hill. The pasture was beginning to turn a golden color, meaning winter was on the way.

A man stood alone at the top of the hill.

The steady wind played with his long hair and cape.

"It's a nice night. Meeting you again this evening has made me so happy."

His voice was calm, like a philosopher talking about his love for the late autumn season.

But his eyes—

Behind the bat-wing-shaped mask, his eyes revealed a honed madness in their unblinking fixation.

"... Karl."

Saya had no other response as she quietly slid her katana from its sheath and allowed it to soak up the moonlight.

How many times had she fought this enemy before?

There had been their chance meeting in the sticky humidity of Vietnam, and the first time they had crossed swords, so many decades earlier.

It didn't matter if she sliced off an arm or a leg or cut him up—he always seemed to swallow the pain and come back again for more. He wasn't the winning type, but his persistence was getting annoying.

"You were so beautiful that night."

Hearing his voice caused a spasm to run along her spine.

"My body had surrendered itself to my perfectly maddening rage, and I would have destroyed everything that moved. Human, monster, I made no distinction."

The fervor that oozed from Karl's words had the honest enthusiasm of a confession from an innocent boy who had been coaxed into something very bad.

"You were so beautiful at that time."

Saya remained silent.

"You looked like a goddess to me. Like Diva, a princess of the night bringing chaos and destruction. Show me one more time. That figure of you . . ."

In a gesture of love, he extended his right hand.

"Dance with me this evening. You are madding, and I am going mad."

With a snap of his fingers the wind began to curl around the hill.

Five more figures suddenly appeared.

They were soldier-type Chiropterans like the ones she had seen at Covent Garden. She thought she had killed one, but now there were even more than before.

"Well, now, shall we begin? It's a party for you and me!" Karl's voice changed, becoming more violent.

The soldiers raised their blades and began to move.

Saya positioned herself on guard and turned around in a panic when she saw them blur out of her field of vision. The five killers had passed her on either side and were headed toward the farmhouse at full speed.

"Your friends always get in the way. So tonight, *they* will be their dance partners."

"Karl!"

"You will dance only with me!"

Saya turned around to see Karl's crooked smile.

He spread his cape open like wings and leapt toward her, pushing out his right arm.

The claws of his Chiropteran hand rang against her raised blade. Saya bent her knees to absorb the impact of the blow and turned to look back at the house.

Feeling Karl's right leg rise up, Saya stepped aside and jumped back. His black leather shoe just grazed her chest and she flipped in the air before landing nimbly on both feet.

However, Karl was in quick pursuit.

He was practically on top of her, and he whipped both his arms at her, his long, monsterlike claws slicing through the open air. Again, they were deflected by Saya's blade as Saya attempted to evade him while keeping an eye on the farmhouse.

One of the soldiers jumped from the ground toward a window with light shining out of it.

That was the living room.

Where Javia and Nahabi were.

"You need to pay attention, Saya! Look only at me!"

Karl's left arm had transformed into one long blade, and Saya almost didn't dodge his swing in time.

Saya expected to hear the sound of breaking glass, but instead she saw the soldier blown back sideways, cutting large divots in the ground as he rolled backward.

What had sent the soldier flying was a casket-shaped cello case.

But there were four more closing in from the sides. If they had Chiropteran strength, then they could bore through a thick concrete wall with ease.

Suddenly the four soldiers switched directions ninety degrees to escape as dark crimson arrows fell from the sky above, causing them to change course. The stakes poking into the grass definitely came from a Schiff's arm.

"Sorry to keep you waiting."

The purple-haired girl in braids spoke like a friend arriving late to meet someone in front of a movie theater.

"You . . ."

Saya looked at Lulu in mild shock.

The battle-ax-wielding girl was standing between Moses and Carmen.

"We didn't come to help. We just have some unfinished business with the Corpse Corps."

His eyes gleaming with anger, Carmen's voice was tinged with flame, as usual.

Moses chimed in with his agreement.

"We fight for our own reasons. You should fight for yourself."

He hoisted up his fang-shaped sickle.

This unforeseen turn of events appeared to have confused the inhuman soldiers known as the Corpse Corps.

They quickly assembled and mechanically restarted their attack.

They probably were calculating odds based on the change in numbers. Four of them faced Hagi and the three Schiff, and the one that had been knocked down earlier was making another attempt to get into the house. Even with their collective battle experience, Hagi and the three Schiff would not be enough to stop him while they were up against these high-model Chiropterans, with their superior abilities, military precision, and cool-headed mechanical attacks.

The sound of gunshots rang out.

The torso of the Corpse Corps soldier at the door of the house flew back violently. This was followed by a series of thunderous booms as the soldier's chest exploded.

The air was filled with smoke and flying chunks of meat, and the grass was drenched with blood. The internal organs of the fallen Chiropteran were completely destroyed, but he wasn't dead.

Kai, who was standing in the doorway, yelled as he reloaded his pistol. "Saya, we can take care of this one over here. There's no way it'll get its hands on the kids."

The way he spoke now was so different than it had been in the past. He knew his limits, and more than that, he put in all his efforts without complaint. He had become a man.

One Corpse Corps soldier slipped past Moses's scythe only to meet the sole of Hagi's boot, tossing him far back. Hagi turned to Saya.

"Saya. Fight."

He had said the same thing to her when they reunited in Okinawa, and she had responded with all her strength.

He and Kai, Moses, Carmen, Lulu—all of them were her shield, and she had to protect the people who were not supposed to be hurt.

"—Hyaa."

From deep in her chest, she brought all of her energy to focus on her sword and pushed back against Karl's claws.

"Very nice, Saya! Show me more of your dance!"

His heels were pushed back, gouging two deep skids in the dirt, and Karl trembled with delight.

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In the battle at Covent Garden, the hard black skin of the Chevalier had deflected the Igniters. No matter how powerful the explosions they were packing, Kai's bullets were no match for a rifle shell or heavy machine-gun fire.

If he couldn't get the shells into the flesh of his enemy, there was no way to show what the exploding bullets could really do. That was where the igniter's job came in. It was constructed to ignite the explosive bullets that had entered the enemy's body all at the same time.

Tonight, Kai was finally able to put the bullets to use as they were intended.

The Corpse Corps soldier whose innards were hollowed out by the explosions triggered by the igniter was already back on his feet and trading blows with Carmen's long pike. The gaping hole in his chest had still not completely closed up.

"It would be good for something . . . if I could hit it . . ."

The soldier was moving erratically all over the place, and it was difficult for Kai to follow him with his eyes. He didn't waste his time raising his weapon to keep up with him, but held his position and decided to fire when the enemy entered into his line of sight. It was the only possible way.

But what he needed was a partner to lure the soldier into his range.

"The only way to do it is to do it." The moment an enemy crossed his rear sight, Kai pulled the trigger.

He fired several shots to the head, but the soldier was quick to deflect the bullets with his sword, and he was unable to crack his helmet.

With the amount of space between them, it seemed the enemy was able to defend against his bullets.

The soldier pointed the sword that had blocked the pistol fire and was bolting straight toward Kai when his head turned abruptly to the side as if he had been struck by an invisible fist.

He wasn't watching his flank when the precisely aimed bullet busted through the helmet, leaving a trail of white smoke as his head barreled sideways.

Unconsciously, Kai's eyes followed the line of fire to the gravel road leading behind the house. There he spotted a tall individual standing alone, and a single name fell from his lips.

"David . . ."

His hair was a mess, his dirty face was covered in whiskers, and his collar was open. But the look on his face, surrounded by gunpowder smoke as he held up the old-style revolver, would have been intimidating to any enemy.

His eyes were bloodshot from alcohol, but in no way did he appear intoxicated.

It was something Kai hadn't seen in a long time in him. It was the look of a true man.

"Get everyone to the front."

". . . Took you long enough to wake up." Kai pushed back his elation so hard the back of his eyes hurt as he replied to David. He tried to keep a stern face, but couldn't help but smile.

"He'll get back up."

"Ah . . . yeah."

Kai responded to David's warning, aimed his gun at the fallen Corpse Corps, and fired. If it had been a normal person there would

have been little worry, since a vital area had been hit, but the soldier's body moved slightly, and the ground next to him stirred.

The igniter sunk into the earth, followed by an explosion of earth and sand into the air.

From the smoke and dust hopped the soldier, who was suddenly closing in above Kai's head.

"Shi—!"

He had to reload—but there wasn't time.

In order to keep from getting killed, Kai threw himself to the ground and rolled away as he reloaded his gun. He rose to his knees with his pistol leveled.

What Kai saw was the soldier coming at him with Lulu's battle-ax sticking out of his spine. The Corpse Corps was once again knocked toward the ground. He dropped in a straight line from the sky, hitting the earth with tremendous force. Carmen immediately skewered his neck, painting the wall of the house red with spattered blood.

"Keep it together, human."

Lulu held her bloody ax to her shoulder and laughed. Kai pointed his gun at her face.

Seven gunshots in a row.

The shells traveled over Lulu's shoulder into the head of one of the other soldiers who had come up behind her.

"You do the same."

Kai hit the release, dropping the empty magazine. He kicked it in the air, sending it flying, before replacing it with a fresh one.

Lulu's cheeks puffed out in disapproval.

+

The cows and horses in the stable next to them were making a racket. It sounded like they were afraid of a predator that had torn through the barn wall.

A single punch from Karl had sent Saya soaring into the barn, but she quickly leapt up and away from there. Through the hole in the wooden wall flew thornlike projectiles, which covered the dirt floor and stuck into the barn's support posts as well as tearing apart a pile of hay.

Saya slid behind a post and held her breath. At this juncture in the battle, she was at a disadvantage. Her enemy could fire a barrage of red spearheads, just like the Schiff. The best defense to that attack was to get in close to him.

"I am so happy, Saya." This time it was Karl's voice that flew in through the hole in the wall.

"The only ones here are you and I. For this fight to the death, you are thinking only of me, and I only of you. No one else to worry about . . ."

His batlike silhouette appeared at the hole in the wall.

He entered slowly, taking one step at a time through the dust- and straw-filled air.

Saya hid, waiting for her prey to come closer. If she could get one slice into him, the battle would be over.

He drew near to the range for a killing strike with her long katana. Until then, she had dissolved herself in the shadows of the nighttime air.

"That's right. Only focus on killing me. Only focus on killing . . ."

As Karl advanced deeper into the barn, the soles of his shoes scraped against the earthen floor.

Then the sound suddenly stopped.

Saya's body tensed. It was a trap.

She felt a slight breeze at her back.

The moment she sensed it, Saya spun around. The blade of her sword faced the ceiling as she drew it up through the darkness and split through the blood-colored lining of Karl's cloak.

"That technique with a sword . . ."

Before registering the words of the voice that rained down from above, Saya had already leapt up off the barn's bare floor.

Her sword met the Chevalier's in midair. Sparks flew, lighting up the walls and pillars.

In the shower of sparks the two combatants split apart.

As Karl retreated, dark red protuberances formed on his right arm.

Seeing the lumps, Saya hit the floor and didn't waste any time leaping up again.

The sound was like rattling iron pans, and a rain of countless tiny arrows tore through the interior of the barn. One wall looked like a beehive, and the equipment hanging on the wall was pulverized.

Saya slipped through the deadly rain like the wind, somersaulting in the air and landing on a beam. She then jumped from straight above Karl, katana first.

His knees bent deep as he blocked her descent with his transformed left hand.

"Grff . . ."

Assisted by gravity, his arm bent down, and her blade cut through his mask. Only a few more millimeters, and Saya would break his skin. Her blood was that close to poisoning his veins.

". . . Amazing! I was able to take all of my beloved's blows!"

His strange voice ripped through his throat. Karl pushed her up and from his right arm flew crimson arrows.

Saya flew up in a handstand and twisted her body in the air to avoid the tiny arrows and to position herself behind Karl. She didn't waste a moment extending her legs and swinging her katana in a horizontal strike.

Karl stepped forward, and her blade cut nothing but air. She pulled her sword back and leapt forward. The deadly red splinters were spread everywhere. Karl again avoided Saya, this time with a forward roll as he tossed himself above the ground, firing the stiff thorns all the while.

The dirt floor was stirred up into a thick cloud of dust, and Saya had to protect herself from his attack by throwing herself laterally.

She kicked off of a post to switch directions and landed on a second-story alcove where hay was stored; but right after that, her knee gave way.

"Wha—"

One of the flying spikes had pierced her left thigh. It hadn't damaged the bone, but had torn a big hole in her muscle. Her blood spilled across the surface of the crystal-like stake in her leg and dripped to the floor.

"Take a look at this ugly arm of mine."

Karl began orating from below her. He wasn't belittling himself—on the contrary, he sounded rather proud.

"It was an idea proposed by Anshel in order to kill you. After finding me in Vietnam, he said, 'If we are going to do something experimental, let's make it something that extends your life.'"

It seemed that a transplanted Schiff arm was the source of his new abilities.

Saya gripped the spike poking out of her thigh.

Clenching her teeth, she slowly pulled herself up. Just touching the wound sent indescribable pain shooting up her spine.

Her fast-healing flesh put up little resistance, and the stake slid out with relative ease.

A larger flow of blood began to pour from the gaping hole, but the wound would soon close, leaving not even a scar. Only her nerve endings still transmitted pain so bad it rang in her ears.

". . . But my destiny was decided from the very beginning. Ever since I became a Chevalier." Karl continued his diatribe from the ground below.

She couldn't see him. Only his voice was pregnant with a quiet passion, and she had the feeling he had an unexpected objective she hadn't yet figured out. Was he so insane that he had entirely lost touch with reality?

"What Anshel wanted wasn't a new brother, but an experimental subject as strong as a Chevalier . . . a slab of meat to dissect and rebuild. What was I to the Chevaliers? Nothing more than a tool to do tests on."

". . ."

A pain rose in Saya's throat. It felt as if she had swallowed one of Karl's needles.

Karl was—he was the same as Hagi.

Hagi for Saya, and Karl for Diva. They had been plucked randomly from the regular world for a specific use. It was thanks to the researchers, faithful to the pursuit of knowledge without

knowing the pain they caused, who lived with no conscience, no other purpose than the study of how cells were assembled.

And yet, Hagi had Saya.

Was there anyone for Karl? Any friends? Anyone to love him?

"Everything I did, I did for Diva only. My only connection to the Chevaliers is that we all share Diva's blood in our veins. For Diva to love me is my only desire . . . but she knew she would leave me from the very beginning."

Saya sensed Karl was moving.

He knew exactly where she was. He smelled the blood dripping from the crack between the floorboards of the raised alcove.

"The only person who understands me is . . . you, Saya!"

The sound of a bowstring snapping resonated through the barn.

Red-colored arrows broke through the floor of the alcove.

Saya saw this as a good moment to take a leap.

She jumped away as the floor below her broke apart, and as she spun through the air, she could see the enemy below her and aimed her blade accordingly.

CLANG!

Her hungry blade fell against his thick claws.

What was waiting for her on the barn floor was not the phantom dressed in his tailcoat, but a huge, grotesque, ashen-colored beast.

The powerful legs of the monster pushed off the ground and a giant membrane unfolded from his left arm.

The wing slammed into Saya, jarring her body to the bone.

"Kyaa . . . !"

She hit the ceiling back first, and they flew through the roof to the outside with Saya caught in the pocket of Karl's wing.

Weighed down by his right arm, Karl used his one wing to fly awkwardly into the night sky.

No matter how strong Karl liked to think he was, the physics of trying to fly with one wing, even without the extra weight of his arm, did not allow for an extended flight. It wasn't long before he stalled and fell toward the hill in the pasture.

The ground shook like a wave breaking onto the shore.

Just before they hit the ground, Saya kicked into Karl's shoulder with both feet, breaking her body from his grip. She rolled head over heels in the meadow, then sprang to her feet.

Her face was covered in dirt, making it difficult for her to see.

A large shadow rose from a patch in the hill where all the grass was torn away.

It looked like an infernal beast rising from the bowels of the earth.

Saya calmed her breathing and adjusted her grip on her katana.

She pointed her sword at the monster, and the tip of her blade reflected the blue shine of the moon.

Karl's eyes burned the same color red as Saya's.

It was almost silent.

"—Saya, let's die together." Karl's voice had the plaintive intonation of a child. "We have no real family, no one wished for us when we were born. I am tired of living for someone else's sake. So let's . . ."

The beast held out his right arm. And there was a sharp spike in the palm of his hand.

"Ready . . . ?"

He kicked up dirt with his hind legs.

He bared his clenched teeth as if a chill ran through him, but then, with a howl, shook away the night. The lonely beast began to run toward her. Hoping for an easy death, focused and fast.

Saya also moved.

Karl released the stake from his right hand.

At the exact same instant, Saya threw her body forward. She twisted like a fish underwater, dodging the crimson arrow flying at her head. Her trajectory carried her in Karl's direction and she slammed into his torso.

However, she barely tore the first layer of skin.

Karl turned in what looked like a dance move, reversing their positions and spinning her body while he whirled away.

Saya caught herself and swung her long sword into his shoulder, splashing blood across his neck.

Then Saya noticed it. Her blood on her sword had dried, rendering it useless.

Karl jumped back again like a shadow hovering over her.

"... Unh."

Saya's lips parted, and an anguished moan spilled out.

Karl wrapped both his arms around Saya's body, crossing them in front of her chest. With her arms pinned to her torso, she was barely able to move, and the painful pressure forced the air from her lungs. The brute strength of the Chevalier was so great she couldn't move her sword to fight back.

Saya could feel his hot breath on the back of her neck.

"If I were to bite through your neck and drink your blood, you would die and I would die."

"I..."

She couldn't hate Karl. He had never wanted to be a Chevalier and he had never gotten anything out of it.

"Shall we go? To a world for just the two of us?"

She felt his nail-like fangs rub the nape of her neck, and then slip under the surface of her skin.

He missed the carotid artery, but she could still feel blood leaving her body, splattering into the mouth of the monster. His lapping seemed instinctual, like a baby animal drinking its mother's milk.

A baby receives life from its mother. But what Karl wanted was death.

He wanted his life to be sucked away. He wanted to be led to the next world.

Her vision began to grow dim, and Saya felt her consciousness waver.

Everyone was fighting.

To protect something, to prove to those who trusted me—

—Where am I?

Her eyes were closed. She opened them wide and looked around.

"I . . . can't die."

Karl's body was going into slight spasms.

The strength with which he had sucked her blood had weakened.

"I can't die in a place like this," Saya said. "There are people I must protect!"

". . ."

His body may have already been weakened.

It could have been the crystallization process had already started inside his body, or maybe it was the movement of his soul—Saya couldn't be sure.

With red threads dripping from his fangs, Karl pulled away from Saya's neck. At the same moment, a silver flash sliced off his left arm in the darkness. Saya didn't even notice.

"Gwaaa!"

Thinking of nothing as he released her, Saya raised her arms forward and far as she could and holding her katana held underhand, she stabbed herself in the abdomen.

Blood gurgled out of the hole in her stomach.

She put a hand on the hilt of her sword and pushed it through her back and into Karl, who was still pressed behind her.

During the next few moments he did not move. His body was almost completely transformed to stone, and with his final breath, a weak voice escaped from his throat.

"Solomon . . ."

Why? With his final mysterious word, Karl's giant frame began to lean backward.

He looked up at the night sky for the final time as his body fell. When it hit the ground, he was pulverized into tiny pieces.

Saya kneeled down among the crimson pebbles scattered at her feet.

A shadow fell on the ground, blocking the moonlight.

"Karl . . . Poor, poor Karl."

The whisper almost sounded like a song, but sad, like crying.

Enduring the pain of a punctured spleen, Saya turned and looked up to see a young man. Bathed in the light of the moon,

his blond hair glittered. But his graceful face was sunk deep in darkness.

Solomon Goldsmith. One of Diva's Chevalier, and from the wrist of his right hand extended a long silver blade.

Dripping from the blade was the blood of Solomon's brother. He was the one who had lopped off Karl's left arm, allowing Saya to break free.

The wind howled.

The meadow stirred, and three shadows surrounded Solomon.

The Corpse Corps.

They stood around their master like trained hounds waiting for orders. The reduction in the number of the faithful soldiers might have been a result of the battle with Hagi and the others. And yet, she sensed not an iota of fatigue or tension in them.

"Unh . . ." Saya bit her lip and attempted to pull her sword from her abdomen. She forced herself to ignore the pain. New enemies had arrived.

Solomon extended his arm. However, the hand he placed on hers, gripping the handle of her sword, was no longer a blade.

"This is absurd. If you force it out you'll only cut apart your internal organs. It will take even you a while to recover."

He seemed very much like a gentleman as his eyebrows came together, concerned. She felt the strength in his hand.

The blade slipped out of her gut, and the brief moment of agony caused Saya to reel back.

"Kwaaa . . . !"

She covered the wound with both hands.

Her short breaths gurgled with blood, and Saya caught herself wheezing. She saw her sword sticking out of the ground by Solomon before she looked up into his gaze.

Why didn't he try to kill her? What better chance would he have?

"Saya!"

He had probably leapt from the base of the hill, but it seemed like the tall figure of Hagi fell straight from the dark sky as he appeared before Saya.

Moments later, Moses, Carmen, and Lulu also landed on the grassy earth, holding their respective weapons at the ready.

"It's Diva's Chevalier."

Moses's comment was overlapped by Carmen's sarcasm. "Sorry. We broke a few of your toys."

"This man helped us, too." Lulu smiled and looked at Hagi. He showed no reaction and stared at Solomon without saying a word.

In an effort to ward off Hagi's glare, the tall blond man gestured at the soldiers with his chin.

"Go home. Go to your beds."

Solomon's curt words appeared to be unquestionable orders from a superior officer to the ears of the soldiers. Without a moment of hesitation, the three jumped straight up and disappeared from the night pasture.

A few moments later, Kai appeared at the crest of the hill, huffing from the climb.

"Chevalier . . . ?"

He quickly pointed the muzzle of his gun at Solomon, but then let it lower a little, bewildered by the broken statue of Karl spread all over the ground.

Saya held her left hand to the wound in her abdomen as she slowly stood up.

"... But why?"

With the slightest of effort Solomon wrapped Saya's fingers around the hilt of her katana.

Solomon remained silent for several seconds as he examined the remains of his brother spread all over the dirt.

"I was jealous of Karl." His grief-filled confession was not an answer to Saya's question.

"He will live quietly in my memories ..." Solomon slowly kneeled on the ground and picked up a single piece of Karl's remains. His action mirrored the Schiff when they lost a sibling. They would hold a piece of the body in their hands over their hearts, to lead them inside, to a place full of love.

However, the chunk of Karl's body didn't stay in Solomon's palm for long. The scarlet crystal cracked between his knuckles, and the powder slipped between his fingers.

"However, that was a misunderstanding on my part. He was simply a lonely soul. And he found that same sense of isolation in you."

"..."

Saya could still feel the burning glare of Karl's eyes as they went from intense to frantic.

His Chevalier brothers had used him as a tool. He had dedicated his life to Diva, and she had abandoned him. At the end Karl had been his own undefeatable enemy. That was why Saya could not feel hatred toward him at the finish. He was so hopeless.

"But you were different from Karl." As Solomon stood up, he looked at Hagi, Kai, and the Schiff with his blue eyes.

"There is a large group of people watching you. Yet you chose a path of isolation. But until he heard it from your mouth, he didn't understand. Escaping to loneliness, he didn't see the harm he was doing to himself. He couldn't even see me watching him . . ."

The fingers of Solomon's right hand closed, clutching the traces of his brother's dust.

What he didn't realize was that he was the same. If Solomon could have seen more quickly into his own heart, seen that he loved his brother, they might not have gone through such pain.

No one spoke for a long time, then Solomon raised his head. "In one week, I understand Diva will head to Christina Island."

The words he spoke were directed at Saya.

She sensed Kai and Moses's spines stiffen in surprise.

"It's up to you if you want to believe me or not."

". . . Why would you tell us?" Saya asked the question without even thinking and saw what looked like a self-deprecating sneer pass over Solomon's lips.

"Maybe I am all alone, too."

Those were his parting words.

A sudden whirlwind forced Saya to shut her eyes, and when she opened them again, the white Chevalier was gone.

Three days later, the skies of London were clear.

This time of year, this city built of brick and stone was often hidden in fog at night, but during the day, the sky was blue and the air clear.

It had been a long time since he had been in the city, and even longer since he had worn a proper suit and tie.

Reminded of the feeling that black jacket had given him for so many years, David exited the elevator. Like any of the fancy hotels in London, impressive Victorian-style decorations lined the hallway of his destination.

"Excuse me."

The entire top floor was almost completely taken up by the royal suite. David knocked on the entrance. A reply soon came.

"It's fine. Come in."

David turned the gold-colored doorknob and pushed the door open.

In the corridor, an electric wheelchair was waiting.

David was moved by the smiling face of Joel, looking up from his seat.

"Thank you so much for coming."

He still had the tone and expression of the longtime head of Red Shield. The only thing that had changed in the past year was the loss of the use of his legs.

He hadn't given up the fight.

David wasn't immediately able to speak, and just watched Joel turn his wheelchair around. Once Joel had his back to him, David gripped the handles and pushed the chair.

To one side of the huge living room was a fancy-looking wet bar. If the guest wished, a bartender could be stationed to tend to drinks, but right now they were the only two people in the room. Guards were likely on standby in another room.

"What would you like to drink?"

"I've already drunk enough to last me a lifetime."

David had spent the last year pumping nothing but alcohol through his liver.

That whole time, Joel, Louis, and Kai had believed in the cause and kept up the fight. Saya and Hagi had broken off on their own, spilling the blood of the enemy in their own way.

It might have been too late for him to trade the bottle back in for a gun, but if there was anything he could do to contribute, then he couldn't stand the idea of rotting away without even trying.

It had been a very long time since he had felt like this.

"Yes, well, then . . ." Joel grinned a little before his expression became rigid and stern. "The truth is, I want to revive Red Shield."

"Chief . . ."

David could see the strength and determination in Joel's eyes, which had grown brighter.

"You calling me that—if I want to destroy Chiropterans . . . if I haven't forgotten the goal of bringing Diva down . . . then I, Joel, must help the Shield with the fight."

When fighting Chiropterans, Joel had always covered David's back and the backs of the other agents, and now David met his gaze without averting his eyes.

"What are your plans, David?"

His answer was already decided. "I will put the scattered Shield back together. Then, is it possible for me to charter a boat to Christina Island in four days?"

"Of course."

Just like nothing had ever changed, Joel gave his consent without question.

He understood what was necessary. David confirmed Joel's faith in him hadn't wavered, and his fingers tightened into a fist.

With a smile, Joel changed the subject. "How about dinner? You can at least stay for appetizers, can't you?"

"I appreciate the effort, but I . . ."

"Already have plans with someone?"

"Something like that."

Leaving the hotel, David walked to a large complex on the outskirts of the city.

It was Cinq Flèche's foodstuffs research facility.

Instead of the traditional English wrought-iron fence, this place had razor wire and live electric lines surrounding its outer wall. Even if it was just to frighten off industry spies, it was a bit over the top for a canned and frozen food facility.

David stopped at a phone-company van parked on the side of the road and knocked on the back door.

From behind the double doors popped Louis's head.

"It's all ready."

"Good."

David hustled into the back of the van and slid his arms into the white coat Louis handed him. He then put on a pair of prescription-free silver-rimmed glasses and slicked back his hair with gel, creating quite a different impression.

"And the ID?"

"It's perfect."

The card Louis handed him was for a senior member of the personnel at the research lab. Except for the face in the picture,

it was a genuine facility ID card. The name on the card, John E. Hamilton, appeared to be that of an actual person.

"The security system won't be a problem at all, but it'll be harder to fool the people you run into."

Louis still used techniques he had learned in the CIA.

"But, seriously, are you going in?"

"Why do you ask all of a sudden?"

Louis hadn't said he had taken too long to prepare, but David knew his friend well enough to tell.

For three days, he had repeated dry runs, reteaching his body how to shoot, among other things.

But Louis seemed to be worried about something else.

"Isn't this a bad time to be doing this? If you aren't careful and something goes wrong, then what happens to Diva and Christina Island?"

"But I have good intelligence that they are vacating this facility to set up shop in the U.S." That was information that Okamura and Mao had picked up off a subcontractor working there. "If that is true, then we need to check it out now."

"And the source of the Christina Island info is one of the Chevaliers . . ."

Louis didn't change his expression, but he surely understood.

It wasn't enough to always respond. Sometimes you had to bend the rules just the right amount, despite the risk, to break a deadlock and get close to your enemy. He didn't trust Solomon, but he didn't have any other choice.

"Be waiting by the rear entrance in one hour."

He did not carry any small arms to the facility. His precious pistol remained behind in its holster as David walked away from the van.

Through the microscope set at over 10,000x magnification, it could be seen that the pulmonary cells were suspended in the solution.

Cultivated using cloning technology, the sample had been transferred to a tank inside the plant, and after several weeks it would take a human form. After a full eighty days, it would be complete, a soldier of the Corpse Corps.

It did not know death, and its brain was not affected by feelings like pain or fear. But what of its soul?

As she pondered this mystery, Julia gazed steadily into the microscope.

The slightest mutation from a normal sample was visible, and Julia reached for the pen and memopad by her side, but accidentally knocked them to the floor.

It was then she realized that she wasn't alone.

She heard what sounded like the rustling of clothes, as someone picked up the pen.

In order to not miss a moment of the transformation, Julia did not take her eyes away from the microscope, just reached out her right hand.

"Thanks."

She wrapped her fingers around the pen, but whoever was holding it didn't let go, and she couldn't pull her arm back.

Julia looked up.

Her eyes widened in surprise.

It was a tall researcher wearing a white lab coat. Behind the unfashionable silver-rimmed glasses were two steely eyes. They hadn't changed a bit.

Her heart beat like an alarm going off as she looked over the face of a man she hadn't seen in a full year.

"... This is an unusual place to meet again."

In the high-security facility, this was the most secret and restricted area of all.

The section was called Zone Z, and outsiders were not allowed in. Even within the company, only those directly involved with Corpse Corps production were allowed in this area.

"So what business do you have here, Mr. *John E. Hamilton?*"

Had he come to punish a traitor?

It couldn't be. She couldn't imagine herself interested in a man with such immature ideas. And the rule of Red Shield was never to harm humans. Their mission was to destroy Chiropterans.

Julia was pretty sure David wouldn't defy that mandate. Even though the organization had collapsed, she figured he still believed in what being a "shield" meant.

His lips remained frozen as she yanked the pen from his hand. She stuck it in her breast pocket and stood from her chair.

"Would you like a cup of coffee?"

"I would."

The coffee she served here was just as bad as the coffee she had made at Red Shield, but he never batted an eyelash.

"—I'll have a hot chocolate." That impudent demand came from the sugar-loving head of research.

As David turned his head in response to the voice, his right hand slid into his white coat, but he wasn't carrying a gun. Only security guards were allowed to carry weapons in this facility.

Several of those security personnel followed Van Argeno into the lab room. He had the same smirk on his face he usually did, and David looked at him without saying a word.

"Haven't seen you since Vietnam, have we . . . let's see . . . *Hamilton?*"

Van knew it wasn't his name, but called him that anyway. He had surely learned the names and faces of all the Red Shield operatives from Goldsmith, who had learned them from Collins.

"Did you sneak all the way into Zone Z because you wanted to learn something about the Corpse Corps? I am thrilled you have an interest in our company's latest product, but there are such things as trade secrets, aren't there?"

Van shot a quick glance at Julia.

"Or did you have some business with your *former* comrade, Julia?"

". . ."

"My, my, my. Would a sweet piece of candy put a smile on that face?"

Something about David's gruff look bothered Van. He fiddled with a mint and brought it up to his nose to sniff it.

". . . I'll take that."

David responded drily, and his body moved as quickly and nimbly as an animal's.

Before Julia knew it, David had plucked the pen from her pocket and wrapped an arm around Van's neck. His other hand held the pen to Van's throat.

The machine-gun-carrying guards surrounded David.

"You're wasting your time. I know you don't have a gun."

Van snorted a laugh. He must have thought David was pretending the pen was the muzzle of a pistol.

But David was thinking something completely different.

"I don't need a gun."

David flipped the pen over in his hand and sunk the tip into Van's skin. Van stopped breathing for a few seconds.

"Want me to show you?"

The point of the ballpoint pen was not very sharp, but with enough strength, it could puncture the carotid artery or trachea.

Finally realizing the position he was in, Van raised both arms to wave back the security guards.

"D-don't shoot! Don't move!"

"A wise decision." With Van's slender neck still in his grip, David slowly moved toward the lab entrance.

With their guns still in hand, the guards moved out of the way.

Julia knew David wouldn't kill Van, but she stayed quiet.

"Don't worry—I am not going to try anything!" Van's shrill voice rang in her ear as she looked at David.

Before they disappeared down the hall he looked once at her, but didn't say anything.

04

THE WIND COMING off the sea wasn't strong, but the chill in the air signaled the arrival of winter.

Out on the deck of the anchored combined cargo and passenger ship, it was especially brisk.

"The crew is still hesitant." Louis stepped out of the interior of the ship, the white vapor of his breath mixed with his grumbling.

"They don't want to go near that island, right? All the hunters and sailors in these parts are the same way."

Kai took a sip of his cold coffee, and looked out at the foggy sea. They were five meters off the coast of the relatively small Christina Island. During the day they could see the outline of the island, but at night, it disappeared.

"After all this, *now* they start to complain. Joel paid them very well for their services." The shoulders sticking out of Mao's fur-lined down vest shook in frustration.

"No need to say that. Country folks get nervous when you talk about things like nuclear-power plants. That's just how they think." Okamura took the side of the fishermen.

The reason the locals were wary was the structure under construction on Christina Island. There seemed to be a lot of confusion about the nuclear waste treatment and disposal plant that was scheduled for completion the following year.

Several decades earlier, there had been a herring processing plant on the island, but that was long gone, and now the island seemed to be completely abandoned. On the other hand, there were more fish for the local fishermen now than ever before. The ocean there was like a garden. The fear was that radioactive waste would be dumped into that garden.

Louis pulled a map out from under his arm and spread it open over a box.

"The circumference of the island is about seventeen kilometers. There is an abandoned village near the shore, but no one lives on the island anymore. There is only an underground nuclear-waste storage facility being built right now."

Louis tapped a gloved finger on an elevated point on the map.

"They are excavating a hole five hundred meters deep. This is the spot where they plan to store the waste. It's the same system used in every country."

"That's where Diva's video shoot will take place?"

Kai directed his question to Okamura. He and Mao were the ones who had uncovered the purpose of Diva's voyage.

"It came out that they were looking for a production company to contract to do the promotion. That's the power of Goldsmith."

"The American investment company paying for the construction of the waste-treatment plant is actually financed by Goldsmith. That was really hard to uncover."

"Much appreciated."

David gave his completely emotionless thanks for Mao's exaggerated efforts and turned his head to Okamura.

"Is the shoot for real?"

"Yeah. The project is confirmed go. I heard that filming is supposed to start tomorrow, but the performers will arrive earlier."

In other words, Diva was among the several people already staying on the island. The construction work had been put on hold for the shoot, so no builders were there now.

"If we really want to get Diva, then tonight is the night."

"It almost feels like the timing is too perfect." Louis expressed his concern between bites of blueberry pie he brought from the ship's kitchen.

"It could be a trap, but that's a risk we have no choice but to take."

No one could refute David's words.

Even with Joel's help in reforming Red Shield, the organization was still weak. Limited manpower and limited information meant limited choices. The way things were, getting one step closer to Diva was more than anyone could have hoped for.

Unfortunately, the one who could turn the possibility into results wasn't Kai or David.

"And Saya still hasn't arrived . . ."

Kai looked up over his head at the source of the voice.

Lulu sat on the stateroom roof like a cat, and sounded as if she were tired of waiting. She looked at the wharf extending behind the ship.

"If that's the way it is, then we'll have to go out on our own. Humans can't win against them." Carmen's voice sounded irritated, and Moses rolled his eyes.

"You mean the Corpse Corps."

"Yeah. They call that the finished product, but we have a lot more experience. They can't keep up."

"And we have more personality, too," Lulu proudly added to Carmen's boasting. There was no question about the Corpse Corps' strength, but couldn't their homogeny backfire in the end? To be without faults also meant to be without advantages.

Each Schiff was different from the others. There were the strong-on-offense Carmen and Dars; the quick-witted Lulu; the keen and sensitive Aurélien; and Ghee, who had a Chevalier-level ability to read and adjust to battle in real time. When the gears of these different styles and abilities worked together, there were few enemies they couldn't get the best of.

"I couldn't be more excited, Moses. I get to beat faces that look just like yours." Carmen gave him a crooked sneer and Moses returned a bitter smile.

"It's not only the Corpse Corps. If Diva is there, that means her Chevaliers are there, too. Depending on the numbers, this could be a tough fight."

"What difference does it make? For our dead brothers and sisters, I will make sure not one of those animals lives to tell the tale." Saying this, Carmen turned to the ship's deck and raised his voice.

"Hey! Aren't we going yet?"

"We'll wait until ten o'clock. That was the deal." As Kai answered, a high-pitched noise filled the air, making the mist which covered the harbor quiver. The ship's foghorn had gone off as scheduled.

"Could Otonashi be lost?" Mao cast her optimistic musing out to the sea.

Her baseless guess was a way for her to try to ease the tensions, but it also sounded like an honest concern. This sort of feeling from a girl who hated sentimentality was more than welcome at times like this.

"Saya will make it." Kai had no way to prove it, but that was his genuine belief.

She knew the place and the time. They were to leave this port to go to Christina Island. Besides the helicopter Diva had taken to the island, this was the only vessel pointed that way. Saya knew all of this.

Saya was afraid of getting outsiders involved in the fight, but Kai never forgot for a moment that he and she were family. He was not an outsider.

On top of that, he was now much like David, a member of Red Shield. His mission was to help and protect Saya.

"Hey! Here she comes!"

Lulu sat up straight.

Kai turned around and saw the figures of Saya and Hagi come up the gangway.

As Saya stood on the ship's deck, she was unable to meet the eyes of the people standing around her, and seemed to search for words as her gaze ran across the floor at her feet.

"..."

"C'mon. Pull yourself together!" Saya was surprised by Mao's slap on her back and she looked up at the taller girl.

"We're all here waiting for you, you know."

Saya followed Mao's eyes and slowly looked across the deck and finally at Kai.

Seeing this, David took a step forward. "I'm glad you made it."

". . . Please take us to where Diva is. Hagi and I will take care of the rest."

But David wasn't about to accept Saya's timid request.

"We are here to support you. Even though Red Shield is in shambles, that hasn't changed. We are your shield."

"But . . ."

The rest of her sentence caught in Saya's throat.

Mao patted her shoulder softly. "This is from Javia. She said it's for you."

Resting on Saya's shoulder was a sealed white envelope.

"OK, we'll head back to Gray's place to wait for you." Okamura began walking down the gangway and Mao quickly followed. It was a decision that had been made beforehand. The two non-combatant civilians would not be put into harm's way.

"Kai, be careful."

"I know."

". . . Umm." Saya's tone had grown only a little stronger, but it was enough to make Mao stop midstep. "Please apologize . . . to Gray-san . . . and everyone . . . for me."

"You! You can do that yourself. Just make sure you make it back and you can bow your head and say it with your own words."

A salty breeze blew Mao's long hair into her face, and she pushed it back behind her head as she let out a frustrated grunt. But then she looked at Saya and smiled.

"Javia was crying. You disappeared all of a sudden. I bet the next time you come back, she'll be hanging off your leg the entire day."

Her kind tone caused Saya to lift her head up as Mao turned down the gangway.

"Bye-bye."

After Mao made it nimbly down the iron stairway and was safely on land, the gangway was pulled up, and the ominous foghorn rang out into the night.

Leaving behind Okamura and Mao, who was slowly waving, the ship separated from the wharf.

The belly of the ship was washed in the cold waves of the ocean as it slowly set its course.

With the broadside of the ship battered by the wind, Saya opened the envelope Mao had given to her.

Inside was a letter folded twice. Kai read it over Saya's shoulder.

—"Thank you for the present. Let's play again. From Teddy Bear's big sister."

The note was written in English, in big letters with different colored crayons.

"... Why does everyone try to look after me?" The salty wind whipped into Saya's words, and it sounded as if she blamed herself.

From the window was an unbroken view of the dark ocean.

The building, situated on the highest point on Christina Island, was still being built, but the residential sections had already been completed.

In one room, James looked reverently at the profile of the young girl sitting in a chair, staring out the window at the sea.

The girl looked just over ten years old but had a mysterious and powerful charm. To James, her very existence was simply beautiful.

Without a doubt, the two other brothers standing in the room shared the same feelings. Solomon, who had remained on the mainland, would join these three tonight.

"I hear Karl is dead."

"Yes, that is right."

James hadn't turned his head as he made his query, and the composed response came from his eldest brother.

He had heard about Karl's death from Nathan, so James felt he should confirm the facts. Anshel's words put the matter to rest.

Another Chevalier had fallen to Saya's sword.

Four remained. More than enough to keep Diva safe.

"Does a brother dying make you sad?"

Nathan got up close behind him and placed his chin on James's shoulder.

James looked at him, bothered, but answered without hesitation. "Without Karl, the uncertainties about his unpredictability in battle have been taken out of the equation. Naturally, this is an advantage."

"How cold can you get?" To Nathan, mourning was a waste of time, and he had never shown any particularly strong emotions. The death of a brother was probably like a scene out of a play to him. "But I wonder if you would be the same if Mama died."

Even as a joke, it wasn't a welcome topic.

Following Nathan's gaze, James looked once again at the "Mama" looking out the window and squeezed the locket which held her portrait.

"I will not allow Diva to be killed."

In a million battles, it wouldn't happen. As long as he was alive.

"That's right. You never change. Well, not since joining the Chevaliers in Berlin, right?"

It had been around the end of World War II, when the Americans and Soviets were knocking on the door to capture the capital of the Third Reich.

Fascism was about to be defeated, and the American military seemed keen on spreading the word of democracy, but it was still a den of racism and religious fanaticism. As a black man in the U.S. Navy, James had been able to rise to the rank of officer due solely to his undeniable excellence and dedication.

He gave it all for the fight. That was all.

Loyal to his own honor, death was something he never feared.

He wasn't one for displays of stupid vanity, like taking a picture of comrade standing in front of a German tank covered by an American flag with a big cigar hanging out of his mouth. He wasn't in it for his fellow soldiers, but for his own pride.

However, humans weren't strong enough to fight only for themselves.

James had nothing he needed to protect.

He had never known his mother. As a baby, he had been abandoned in front of a post office in a crime-filled slum. His sole meaning in life was serving his country. He battled evil to protect his homeland. Some thought his determination was cute.

However, the rampant racism in the military gave James nothing but disappointment.

He and his fellow soldiers had walked the line between life and death, which should have made them the same as family,

but the truth was that there existed thick walls between them. Factions: race, religion, nationality . . . vague and inefficient.

The few in whom he had seen genuine strength were Anshel and Solomon—and, of course, Diva.

She had chosen him and it had changed his life.

Once there was someone besides himself he could protect, he had surpassed the human James Ironside and had become a proud and powerful knight.

"How long do you think you can keep that up?"

He looked at Nathan's smirk as he stroked a chain with a dainty hand and James's brow wrinkled.

Somehow, the sensation of the locket in James's hand had disappeared.

". . . Give it back."

"I already did."

James shot daggers from his eyes at Nathan, who pointed a finger at James's chest.

Just as it had been snatched away, James could suddenly feel the locket and chain resting inside the breast pocket of his uniform. He patted his pocket with his fingers to check and let out a frustrated sigh.

"Quite the magician."

"—James." The flighty voice came from nearby.

Diva wore a sailor suit with culottes, and her boyish face looked up at James.

"You'll protect me, won't you?"

James knelt down, put his right hand over his heart, and gazed lovingly at his queen mother.

"Everything I do is for Diva."

His life was a small price to pay for her safety.

Yet, no one could defeat him. James thought he would be able to protect Diva for eternity.

As Anshel stared out the window, he let out a low grumble.

"Solomon is . . ."

"What is it?"

Ignoring Nathan's curiosity, the eldest brother and leader of the Chevaliers turned around.

The tone in his voice as he said his brother's name had sounded sad, but as he turned around, James could see that Anshel wore the same mysterious smirk he usually did.

"Diva, it is almost time to head back."

"Are we going home already?"

"I am sorry."

Anshel didn't explain why. But Diva didn't protest. She trusted his judgment. Or maybe she already sensed his intentions.

A light from a ship could be seen floating on the black ocean.

It looked bigger than just a fishing boat. And it was coming closer to this island, something the inhabitants of neighboring villages would never do.

"Oh, too bad. Did the video shoot get moved?" Nathan asked.

"Yes, exactly."

Anshel looked at Nathan as he answered his question.

"James."

"Yes, I know."

The shoot had been moved, but the rest of the plan would continue. It was painful to have to manipulate Diva like that,

but she would enjoy hearing how they were baiting their target.

As always, James had qualms about Anshel's foresight. He didn't know how Anshel divined the knowledge he did, but he was a very capable commander.

As a military man, James's duty was to execute a perfect mission and achieve the objective. Nothing more.

The large ship was not able to dock directly at the island.

It would attract too much attention, and the chances of being ambushed were higher. On top of that, the ship's crew didn't want to get any closer to the plant on the island.

It wasn't a good time of year for swimming in the ocean, but David and the others had planned to approach that way from the beginning. They left the ship in two rubber rafts with outboard motors and landed on the shore.

"I can see lights on in the building at the top of the summit."

Kai poked his head between two crags and then lowered the night-vision binoculars from his face.

"That's the waste-disposal plant that's still under construction."

After making sure his gun was free of any seawater, David pushed the cylinder sideways and back into place before he spoke. He wore gray army fatigues and a bulletproof vest. In the darkness, he blended in with the ground. Kai and Louis wore the same uniforms, and carried a semiautomatic pistol and a machine gun, respectively.

A year ago, Kai had been just a typical high-school student, but now it didn't seem at all strange to him that he was outfitted

in this equipment, with a pistol in his hand. He was now in the same group as David, a Red Shield soldier, and he had heard Saya's opinion on the matter several times.

Kai had grown taller and stronger.

But when Kai's body was placed in danger, even intentionally, it caused Saya great pain. At Gray's house, he had helped out with the cows and sheep, and he never got tired of seeing Javia and Nahabi's smiling faces . . . That was the lifestyle that Saya thought matched Kai the best, just like how he had kept Riku and her smiling in Okinawa.

Until now, she had received many things from Kai. If she could make it up to him, it would be by returning him to a safe and peaceful life. To make that possible, she had to do one thing.

Destroy Diva. That was the reason they were here.

"Diva is over there . . ."

Saya looked up to the summit and held her katana and its sheath, focusing her strength on her grip.

In the fragrant air of the rocky shore, she could feel movement.

"It's them!" Carmen almost sounded happy as he raised his trident.

Saya freed her katana and placed the sheath quickly into Hagi's waiting hand.

Just after that, several shadows dove from the rocky crags into the night sky.

It was the soldiers with the face-covering helmets that looked like the lowered visors of medieval knights. Corpse Corps.

The sound of metal lashing against metal rang out and orange flames shot into the air.

Lulu, Moses, and Carmen had jumped into the air at the same time, attacking the enemy with their drawn weapons.

The enemy parried the Schiff's attack and retreated backward to give themselves enough space to prepare for the next round.

However, the Schiff weren't about to let the Corpse Corps take the time to ready themselves.

Moses slipped between the crags, keeping up with one soldier as he sliced through the darkness with his giant sickle. The soldier mostly avoided the sickle's slash, but a small spray of blood shot from his chest and mixed with the sea wind.

"Moses! Wait!"

"We'll take care of these ones."

He answered Kai's call quickly, and suddenly Moses was far in the distance.

"We only move together. It's easier that way." Carmen parried an attack from a soldier with his pike and glanced at Kai only with his eyes before inserting his opinion.

"Don't go so fast. They are trying to split us up . . . !"

Kai's warning did nothing to slow the Schiff down. Copying Moses, Lulu and Carmen followed the fleeing Corpse Corps.

In the span of a second, the three Schiff disappeared from view. Only the sound of weapons clanging could be heard far down the coastline.

"Shit."

Kai punched a rock in frustration as David tried to calm him and get him to approach the situation sensibly.

"It can't be helped. We'll have to find Diva on our own. Let's head up to the summit."

"All right."

Saya returned her blade safely to its scabbard and stood up.

Saya agreed with Kai: the Corpse Corps had probably been sent to whittle their numbers. For a surprise attack, they were pretty obvious. And they retreated at the first sign of a counter-attack. They knew how to get a reaction out of the Schiff.

And it meant one more thing.

The enemy knew they had landed.

They could not catch Diva by surprise. On top of this, their only path to the building was straight from the front.

They proceeded with great caution, but they went up the trail to the summit without running into anyone else.

Millions of years earlier, this island had risen from the ocean floor, likely born from lava. The mountain's surface was made up completely of huge rugged stones that crunched beneath their feet at they walked. At the top of the summit, Saya saw a gigantic dark opening.

It looked to be the mouth of a long-sleeping volcano.

This hole, the future home of nuclear waste slowly approaching its half-life, gave a gloomy moan, accompanied by a gust of wind.

Next to the giant pit was a very new building, which might have been built for the construction workers building the plant now, or for the engineers who would work there in the future. It was from this structure Saya had seen the light from the shore.

"I can't confirm anyone outside or through the windows. Saya, you got anything?" David asked, after giving the building a long look from the shadow behind a bundled stack of building supplies.

Saya closed her eyes and searched for the scent of Diva's blood.

In the wind and the darkness, she couldn't detect her presence.

"No . . . I can't sense her from here."

"All right."

As David considered their next move, a familiar smell entered Saya's nostrils.

It wasn't Diva.

But it was very similar. It was also a scent she remembered from sometime in her past.

"They're here . . . !"

Saya looked up and saw not her enemy, but something metal flying through the air. A javelin-shaped iron pole flew straight at her in a low arc, and Saya had to think fast. If she jumped out of the way, Kai and the others would be in danger.

Saya's body froze stiff in hesitation for only a moment, but it was still enough time for Hagi to take action first.

"Get back!"

As she heard those words, Saya saw his tall figure leap in front of her, with the bulky cello case raised.

The sound of the impact rang in her ears as Hagi was pushed backward, raising a cloud of dust.

The tenacious cello case deflected the metal pole into the pile of construction material. Pieces of metal flew all around, along with the snapped wires that had held them together.

"What was that?!" Louis cried out from his position on the ground while Kai and David rolled behind a shelter.

Saya leapt into the air.

Scraps of metal scattered randomly, cutting big dents into the earth. Saya dashed between the bits of scrap, away from the

crater, aiming straight for the jet-black monster, the grip of her sword squeezed with all her might.

"Hyaa!"

She aimed straight for his forehead, but her blade was repelled like it had hit a solid shield.

—It didn't work?!

Leaving a trail of sparks, Saya flew back.

He had blocked her attempt to scalp him with the shell of his left arm, then tossed her with his right. Saya's feet crushed the ground beneath her when she landed.

From the cover of the building's concrete foundation came Kai's voice.

"It's him . . . !"

"You know this monster, Kai?"

"Yeah. The Chevalier from Covent Garden."

Kai groaned as he pulled Louis to safety.

One she saw that all of them were in a safe spot, Saya felt comfortable confronting her enemy once again.

The windows in the building reflected the beautiful shine of James Ironside's glossy obsidian skin.

"Saya Otonashi, your one-hundred-odd-year journey ends here, tonight."

He spoke as if the future were firmly predetermined. Then, the ferocity in his voice seemed to disappear.

"The one person in this world with the blood that can kill Diva. With you gone I can guarantee her safety."

Bullets bounced off his head as if he wore an impenetrable helmet and visor.

Standing from his cover with his pistol extended with both hands, David stiffened in surprise.

"The bullets . . . ?!"

"Guns don't work on him!" Kai explained as David dove back down for cover just as the concrete foundation broke into pieces.

James looked bored as spearlike claws shot from his right arm and smashed through the concrete at his side as if it were dry sand.

David rolled to the side and ducked behind a crane.

Louis fired his machine gun randomly for cover.

Unfortunately, even the machine gun wasn't enough to put a hole in the giant beast's skin. The bullets bounced off and fell to the ground like heavy rain.

"Stop! You might hit Saya!"

Kai's fear didn't come to fruition, but the fire did give the enemy an opening.

Through the dust, James's black claws made a stab at Saya, who parried with her sword.

"Kuaaa . . . !"

The sheer force of the impact lifted her off the ground, but she was somehow able to land on her feet and wasted no time in darting sideways. Smoke filled her field of vision, but the monster would be experiencing the same problem. By changing her position, she could get into point-blank range of his body's weak spot . . .

But the enemy had apparently anticipated such an attack.

Saya spun to her left and struck upward at his armpit, but James's elbow was already falling and easily thwarted her attack.

He then straightened his elbow, extending his fist, but Saya avoided his punch by diving backward. She landed on top of a pile of concrete blocks, then was forced to jump again as James upended the pile with a giant swipe of his claws.

Saya nimbly pushed off flying bricks with her feet as the black spear smashed through them.

She landed on the ground, carried forward by her momentum.

James lifted his right arm, and from each of his five fingers projected steel awls, forcing Saya to dodge again.

"Your agility, reaction speed, and quick adjustments are amazing, as I expected. However, you are no threat."

As his attacks continued, James spouted empty compliments.

Saya ignored his comments.

As more dirt and sand were blown into the air from the monster's movements, Saya focused on avoiding his attacks and catching her breath.

James's flexible spears flew far and his aim was accurate. More than that, the attacks were relentless. Saya had to constantly stay on the move or risk being hit. What she wasn't able to do was get in close enough to him to strike.

Yet, the chance would eventually come.

James's crimson eyes, which had been focused on Saya, abruptly turned away.

From the opposite direction, Hagi swooped in, his right arm floating on the night wind as his white bandages unraveled. His claw glinted in the moonlight as it closed in on James.

But before he was able to lay a finger on the onyx beast, more rigid javelins flew out of James's fingers and straight toward

Hagi. He promptly raised his cello case to stop the attack, but that forced him to stop his advance.

That gave Saya the chance to drive forward. James was distracted by Hagi, delaying his reaction to Saya by a few moments. By the time she had to dodge his first spear, she was already very close to him.

Saya ducked low, and the spear grazed her hair and the ground behind her.

Saya drove forward without flinching and James shot two more spears that skewered only the night air before clanking onto the ground.

Saya leaped just after the last spear.

With a sharp cry, she thrust her sword toward his eye socket, but James leaned his head to the side at the last moment, and her blade only grazed his cheek. Only the faintest scratch could be seen on his skin.

"Did you think my guard was down?"

Saya calmly ignored James's ridicule and kicked off his chest, somersaulting in the air. It was not to get distance between them, but to get into position to slide under him.

She dove down. Her outstretched body coiled like a spring when she hit the ground, and shot her between James's legs. At the same time, Saya shifted her body onto one leg as she drove her blade with all her strength into the back of James's knee.

Flames flew off the steel blade.

"Ku . . . !"

Her blade was halted by the claws of his other foot, which looked reptilian, with the hard carapace of a rhinoceros beetle.

"Your attacks are so predictable."

Saya was in shock for only a moment, but then, like a horse kicking off the dirt, she jumped onto his back. He tossed her high into the air, throwing off her sense of balance.

Somehow, she deflected a steel bolt that came up as she was falling down, but she hit the earth in a heap. Still, she was able to ward off the unrelenting attacks with her sword, even if it took everything she had. James threw her again, this time into a concrete wall.

". . . Unnh!"

"Saya!"

The wind had been knocked out of her, and as she struggled to catch her breath, all Saya could hear was Kai's shout and the sound of gunfire.

"Let's assess your battle readiness. You haven't learned a single thing since the fight at Covent Garden. Therefore, the probability of you defeating my impenetrable fortress of a body is still zero." James raised a hand to Kai's bullets as if he were swatting at a meaningless fly.

His claws turned to pointed spearheads and shot through the night air.

Saya looked up just in time to see the bolts blocked by a jet-black shield.

They clanged sharply off the lid of Hagi's cello case. Hagi's feet were pushed into the ground as James's arm pulled back from the recoil.

Even though his hand flew back, no other part of James's body moved.

Saya realized that up to now she hadn't seen James really move his legs.

"To a Chevaliers, you are no more threatening than a human or a Schiff . . . our abilities on the battlefield are so overwhelmingly superior, it's a completely different class. Your defeat was determined when the Schiff gave into their feelings and allowed the Corpse Corps to lead them away."

She couldn't refute that.

She had unlocked no other avenues for her sword to reach his eyes.

Diva was right under their noses, but unless they could do something, she would walk away once again.

"Five hundred meters deep. You will sleep in the bowels of the earth."

The deep pit behind James's back emitted an ominous moan. It sounded like the voices of the dead, crawling back to the surface to air their grievances.

"If you fall down the shaft and smash against the walls, it may not kill you, but I wonder how many years it would take you to crawl out. With you wasting all your energy, all we need is enough time to complete our plan."

His arms opened wide, as if he wanted her to come to him.

"Attack me, Saya."

"..."

Saya gripped the handle of her sword tightly, but she didn't step forward.

David and the others also held back.

A strange silence fell over the scene, and in the eloquence of the wind and quiet of the moon, she felt the presence of each individual.

"Saya."

The voice came from the shadow of the concrete structure behind her.

Kai must have moved positions during the battle. From his whisper, she could tell he was low to the ground.

"He's right. We can't beat them on our own . . . We need Hagi."

"Hagi?"

Surprised by the request, Saya almost turned around, but she couldn't look away from her enemy, even for a second. She kept the tip of her katana square on his eye as she quietly answered Kai.

"What's your plan?"

"I have it covered. Please."

There wasn't time to think or discuss. Saya glanced at Hagi, who was at her side.

He replied briefly and without hesitation.

"If that is what you wish."

Saya lowered her chin slightly. "Fine. Go."

"Just wait here. We'll be back soon."

As Kai pulled his body back he looked at Hagi, the one whose help he had requested. "C'mon, bro."

The drops of ocean water cast in the air caught the moonlight, making them look like tiny prisms.

As Moses sprinted down the beach, those tiny orbs broke against his cheeks. They were cold, and he could feel the salt sting his nostrils.

He had swung his scythe at the soldier who had landed just before him and barely missed, sending the blade into the breaking waves and sand.

He made the decision to pursue right as he sensed someone behind him, and Moses jumped. The long blade smoothly bisected the ocean air and snipped only the hem of Moses's monklike robe.

Another enemy appeared from above and Moses quickly brought his scythe upward, blocking the long blade with its handle.

"Urkk." Moses twisted his body to change direction and landed hip deep in seawater.

For a moment he felt like he might lose his balance as three attacks came at him at the same time, but one of those attackers was eliminated by Lulu's battle-ax swinging into his spine.

"Damn these . . . !"

The bone-breaking blow sent the Corpse Corps soldier sinking into the ocean with a giant splash.

The other two attackers were immediately in front of Moses.

Moses promptly bent his knees, with his curved sword ready to go for the throat, and he spun his sickle with such force that the butt end of the long handle embedded itself in the other soldier's side.

He needed to finish off the enemy that had fallen into the water, but there was no time.

The soldier Lulu had been fighting up until a few moments ago was running across the surface of the ocean as if he was on dry ground, and he was closing in fast.

"Damn it!"

Carmen had exchanged blows with the fifth soldier on the beach. He kicked the soldier in the stomach, putting distance between them, then threw his three-bladed pike like a spear.

It thrust into the flank of the soldier closing in on Moses.

The soldier's body was thrown sideways, and he seemed unaware of Carmen as he crashed into the sea.

The splash filled Moses's field of view.

"Thanks."

"Be careful."

Moses's short word of gratitude met with an almost equally short reply. Carmen stood on top of the soldier's body to recover his weapon, then flew into the air. After a few wave-turning splashes, he landed once again in the sand.

The soldier on the beach was waiting for him, and his sword met Carmen's pike with a thunderous clap the moment the Schiff hit dry ground.

Moses slapped an incoming ocean wave with his hand, and the recoil ejected the lower half of his body from the water. Water droplets rose in an expanding ring around him and sparkled as he sailed into the air.

The next moment, three long blades came between the waves and intersected in the space Moses had just occupied.

Just as the blades touched there was a sudden collision.

The three soldiers floating in the ocean had moved at the exact same moment.

As Moses floated below the moon, the three enemies flew up to him in a whoosh, shaking off beads of water. Moses blocked as many blows as he could, but was forced to direct his wrenched body to a crag sticking out of the sea.

He then hopped down toward the sand and cursed the lack of cover.

". . . So they are going to get rid of us one at a time, huh?"

The three-on-one attack from the soldiers had shredded his robes and even cut through the military uniform underneath. He could feel the cuts on his body closing up.

Before Moses knew it, he was no longer on the beach, but in old ruins surrounded by a grove of trees.

The rotting structures had once been inhabited, but judging by the erosion from the wind and rain, it had likely been many decades. Now it was what humans called a ghost town.

From the tall trees came more downward attacks. Moses zigzagged to escape the striking blades, but soon found the best way to go was up.

He landed with his back to the wall of a dilapidated house, and realized that he had been led into a trap.

The wall was to his back, and to his right lay a big pile of scrap wood and fishing gear. To his front and left, enemies blocked his path. Moses looked up to see the third soldier looking down at him from atop the scrap pile.

"Not in a place like this . . . !"

He couldn't allow himself to be killed. He still needed to destroy the manufactured Corpse Corps and take revenge on Diva.

They must have smelled his regret.

Without any cruel words or sinister smiles, the emotionless machines engaged their next move. Two soldiers began to run and the third jumped.

Right then, the night air groaned.

A massive blunt force slammed into the head of the falling soldier, carrying him temple first into the wall. From the cracks in his pulverized helmet splattered the red and pink insides of his skull. It looked like a rose painted on the gray stone.

What dropped to the earth was a casket-shaped cello case.

Even for the powerful and immortal soldiers, once the brain was destroyed, there was no chance of regeneration.

However, that fact didn't seem to strike fear in the others. Aware of, but unphased by, the death of their comrade, they shifted their focus from Moses the holder of the cello case.

Just before they attacked, another soldier's head blasted open.

Fragments of helmet mixed with blood flew sideways. Half of his head was missing, as if it had been bitten off by a carnivorous animal.

"Why . . . What are you doing . . . ?"

For a moment, Moses forgot about the weight of his sickle as he stared at them.

The tall young one lifting the cello case was Saya's Chevalier, and the pistol-packing Kai Miyagusuku was there with him.

"Moses, we have a favor to ask."

"Favor?" Moses's eyebrows furled, and his eyes darted about.

The soldier Kai had shot tried to quickly stand up. Clearly the entire brain hadn't been blown away, rejecting Death's invitation for the umpteenth time.

". . . Let's talk a little later."

First they needed to take care of the enemies before them.

From the lower part of the shore came the silhouettes of Lulu and Carmen at a very high speed. They seemed to have ended the battle from which they had come. If that were the case, then there were only two targets left. More than being helped by a human and a Chevalier, if they needed any more time to finish them off, it would be embarrassing to the Schiff name.

He didn't know where Hagi and Kai had run off too, but James took this opportunity to shift from defense to offense.

"It doesn't matter what your plan is. It's already too late."

No matter how much David and Louis's gunfire scored his back, James did not flinch. Their bullets bounced off, stirring up the dirt.

Saya readied herself when the gunfire tapered off.

"Watch where you're shooting!"

Louis grimaced as he pointed the mouth of his machine gun to the sky. Saya was on the opposite side of the target of their gunfire, forcing them to hesitate. Both she and James were in range of each other's attacks.

A beast with an exoskeleton this strong didn't need to worry about simple bullets, but it was obvious that a chance to take Saya down seemed very attractive to him.

James lunged forward with a speed that was unimaginable for a beast with a body his size.

He swung his loglike arm, grazing Saya's hair. She hunkered down.

James's blow knocked a hole in the concrete wall Saya was leaning against, and as her body switched places with his fist, she swung her katana vertically.

Sparks flew from the point where her blade met his arm, but her sword bounced off his hard black armor with a nasty rattle.

"I knew it . . ."

Her vibrating hands gripped her sword tighter as she cursed, and Saya spun around. Her white knuckles indicated she wanted to continue the fight, but now she made a hasty retreat.

James's claws pierced the ground just in front of where she had landed. The ground, so carefully leveled for the construction of the treatment facility, was returned to its original rough state.

With hardly a moment to take a breath, Saya kept moving as she waited for a chance to counterattack.

However, even if that opportunity presented itself, there was no guarantee she could actually damage her opponent.

Regardless, she was ready to continue. One hundred rejections only made her want to take one hundred more swings at him.

Saya had attacked him enough to know how impossible it was to hurt him.

James's skin was so hard it repelled any bullet and any blade. But despite the gauntlets of his forearms, the space between his joints at his elbows was wide enough for a blade to enter.

Naturally, James was aware of any weakness in his body. He didn't allow himself to be in a position where those areas of his arms were exposed. His weak spots were kept hidden.

The inside of his elbows, his eyes, and one more place—

Saya avoided the swing of his right arm as he bore down from above. As she sprung into the air she asked, "Where is Diva?"

"Don't be stupid. If I were to tell you . . ."

Saya bolted toward James as he responded.

It took a moment for James to adjust to Saya's switch from defense to offense.

The claws pointing out of James's right hand changed into arrows and fired at Saya. She made the smallest leap necessary to let them pass beneath her. She jumped on his arm and drew close to him as she raised her blade.

"Impossible!"

Could Saya's guess be right? James put his left arm in front of his face in defense and lost sight of Saya.

Covering his eyes with his arm gave his enemy a blind spot to take advantage of. In that moment, she halted her blade before it struck and let gravity drop her to the ground.

Just before James's chest.

". . . ?!"

He was expecting an attack from above, and when it didn't happen, James got confused. Searching for his enemy, his crimson eyes looked down and right into Saya's pupils.

Saya then stood up from her knees and thrust her sword almost straight up.

The blade sparkled as its tip moved up and slipped between the monster's fangs.

His outer layer of skin was matchless in its strength, but she guessed that couldn't be true for the inside of his mouth.

And yet—

The painful shriek of steel on steel filled the air.

". . . Urk."

Saya clenched her teeth at the realization that a chance had slipped from her fingers as James brought down his left arm directly above her.

Saya threw herself backward.

The jet-black arm crushed a rock crag, sending tiny pieces of stone flying in all directions.

Saya's sword was no longer in her right hand. It was stuck in the large monster's throat, still scissored between his upper and lower fangs.

He casually shook his head. The sword fell from his mouth and landed on the ground near James's feet.

"Let's confirm one more time—it's impossible."

James took one step forward to emphasize the evidence.

Saya took one step back in response. She knew no further retreat was possible.

The heel of her boot knocked a small rock down a sudden steep drop.

The strong wind pressing her back was from the bottom of the earth, and it carried the outstretched hands of the dead.

Behind her was the gate to hell.

James was about to take another step forward when a bullet struck him in the head.

"Weak humans!"

Blood poured from his eye socket and the irritated James turned his head.

"Saya!"

Kai had run up the mountainside and held his gun in position as he yelled to Saya.

James shielded his face and looked toward Kai as a battle-ax struck his raised right arm from above. The spears he fired from his claws were knocked off course and shot into the ground.

"Take that!"

The person wielding the ax was Lulu.

And she wasn't alone.

Carmen and Moses drifted in on the night wind from either side of James with their respective pike and scythe at the ready. They went directly for James's legs, preventing him from moving.

"Damn you . . . !"

James's voice cut off as he felt pressure on his kneecap, causing Carmen to laugh fearlessly.

"Your toy soldiers won't be coming to help you."

"Trust him. I saw it firsthand."

Hearing Moses's words, Saya understood how they had been able to come back to help her.

Kai had persuaded them and brought them here.

It was thanks to him the very different missions of the humans and Schiff could be intertwined.

James brought his right arm up to strike, but stopped as Hagi swooped right in front of him and grabbed his arm.

His giant arm was forcibly held back, exposing the crack in his onyx armor. Hagi dug his claws into the tiny gap.

Crack . . .

It was the raw sound of tight muscle fiber being pulled apart as the supposedly unbreakable armor was peeled back from James's forearm.

"You fools! I am Diva's shield, and now my body . . ."

His cry resonated from the mountaintop, shaking even the wind, and with a burst of latent energy James threw the Schiff off his limbs.

James's left arm became black iron and punched Hagi in the abdomen.

Hagi scowled not from the pain, but from the strain of holding up both of James's arms. Although he was spitting blood, Hagi had a good lock on the arms James was trying so hard to protect.

"Saya!"

Saya ran to him like the wind.

It only took a moment for her to stand just before James and wrap her fingers around the grip of her precious katana. In one smooth motion, she pulled the sword from its resting place and swiped the back of the blade against her left palm.

"—Hyaaa!"

She extended her legs and leaped, painting a crimson trail in the air with her sword.

Her blade pierced the exposed flesh of James's right forearm.

His coiled muscle tissue was tough, but nothing compared to the outer layer of armored skin, and the blade penetrated the flesh, which immediately began to crystallize.

"It won't . . . end like this!"

James swung his left arm at Saya's hip, sweeping her off the ground.

But it was doubtful he expected to crush her to death. His right arm was already showing signs of death, and her poisonous blood would soon be flowing through his entire body. The best way to kill an enemy with an impenetrable exterior was from the inside out. Soon, he would turn to ashen-colored stone, and the shape of James would break apart into tiny pieces.

James ran, still carrying Saya.

Before them was the five hundred meter-deep abyss.

His dead right arm broke into pieces eroded by the wind.

Saya flipped her sword around in her hand and took a stab at James's bent knee. The tip of her sword broke through his weakening outer armor and slid into meaty flesh.

But at that moment James jumped off the ground, over the construction equipment, and into the gaping pit.

"For Diva . . . for Mama . . . you will die."

James's voice was peaceful.

His body began to crumple, and Saya had already freed herself from his grasp. However, she couldn't reach the edge of the hole with her hand.

"Sayaaa!"

When she heard Kai's voice, Saya thought her ears were playing tricks on her.

But she could see him jump from the edge of the crater, and his right hand interlocked with her left.

"Kai . . . !"

Why?

If Saya had been alone, there was a good possibility she could have survived a fall of this height. But there was no way she could help Kai. Human flesh could not withstand that level of impact, and he didn't have the ability to heal quickly.

But he knew that. So, why?

With the air whipping past them, Kai looked straight into Saya's eyes. It was there she found her answer.

Saya bit her lip and squeezed Kai's hand tight.

She wouldn't let Kai die.

She absolutely would not let Kai die. Even if it meant her body would be smashed to pieces.

He must have read her feelings.

From the corner of her eye, she saw a sliver glint at the shrinking mouth of the crater.

It looked like a bird, and it was coming toward them at an incredible rate of speed. The whistle of the wings cutting through the air of the pit grew higher and higher.

Before Saya was able to clearly discern the shadow falling toward them, she had the sense of floating, and of being pulled up like she was a toy.

It snatched their bodies in its talons.

"Goodbye, James."

His voice was strange as he gave his parting words.

"Solomon . . . !"

James's eyes were muddied with resentment. His bottom half was almost completely stone and was eroding as he fell through the air. He could neither sprout wings to fly nor slam his claws into the pit walls to slow down, so the Chevalier had no way to save himself.

On the opposite side, Saya felt the incredible strength in the claws lifting her up toward the growing mouth of the hole.

"Just in time, eh, Saya?"

". . . Solomon?"

She had never imagined Solomon looked like this in monster form.

His golden-maned head looked like that of a wolf demon. His arms were like bat wings and the white skin covering his body looked like an ancient dinosaur's.

Saya doubted that Solomon could have really cared for this grotesque transformation. And when they landed back on solid ground, Saya once again saw the charming figure of Solomon Goldsmith standing before her.

"Why are you here?"

Saya's tone was not one of hostile cross-examination.

Her attitude toward Solomon was kind. He had just rescued not only her, but Kai also. It wasn't only Saya who saw him differently, but also David and Louis, as well as the Schiff. Everyone looked at the white-suited young man with confusion.

"When you arrived on this island, Diva was already gone. Niisan suspected I was leaking you information, and everything that happened played out in the palm of his hand, just as he had planned."

He didn't look sorry as he cast his eyes to the ground.

"Niisan?"

Saya remembered that she had heard him speak of an older brother before.

It was Solomon who had told her that his brother was trying to kill her. His tone was always respectful when he spoke about him, but also cautious.

"Anshel Goldsmith—the eldest brother and master of Diva's Chevaliers."

The moment David heard that name his face went pale. ". . . Is that for certain?"

"Yes. You of Red Shield might be familiar with his name." Solomon affirmed David's question like it really didn't matter.

Saya had a very faint recollection. The name was from Joel's diary. The assistant who had helped the very first Joel take Saya and Diva from their mother's womb was named Anshel. Of course, there was no positive evidence that this was the same person.

Solomon looked out over the ocean from the top of the hill and his eyes narrowed in the wind.

"Right now Diva is likely preparing to go to New York."

"Next stop is America, huh? . . . You guys are busy, too." Louis's expression and tone were more fatigued than his choice of words.

Once again, Diva had gotten away. It appeared the fight would move from Europe to America.

Solomon looked at Saya regretfully for several seconds, then turned his gaze back toward the sea.

"I will take my leave . . ."

"Solomon, if you are our enemy, then why . . . ?" Saya did not step toward him, but the desperate tone in her voice stopped him.

The transparent smile on his handsome face showed no artifice.

"If I said it was because I love you, would that be answer enough?"

Saya stopped breathing, and her spine tightened.

His smile had disappeared.

His eyes were like two blue pools, and Saya couldn't break away from his gaze.

It seemed like Solomon was about to walk toward Saya, but he stopped when a black-suited young man moved between the two of them.

Hagi's unrelenting look made Solomon grin.

". . . I don't want you to look at me like that. I have no intention of fighting you."

He turned adroitly to the side and faced into the strong wind.

"You'll excuse me—"

And with that, the wind carried Solomon up and away.

Kai, who had been staring at the blond Chevalier the entire time, began to sway and his knees buckled.

"What's wrong, human?" asked Lulu.

"I'm OK." Kai smiled in an attempt to calm Lulu's worry.

"Try to relax."

"It doesn't take much to kill a human."

Moses's caring words were followed by Carmen's derision. The old Kai would have flown into a rage, but this time he just forced a smile.

"It's nothing that a person would die from."

But the beads of sweat on his forehead indicated he was in quite a bit of pain. His fatigues were torn open from his shoulder down his back, and the fabric glistened with blood. He might have been injured by the dying James when he dove into the hole.

"It may not be deep, but you still need to get it taken care of."

"I'll grab the stretcher from the boat."

As David examined Kai's back, Louis began heading down the mountain.

Saya saw Louis off and then went to Kai's side.

". . . Why? Why did you do something so crazy?"

The Kai from a year earlier had never thought about consequences, and it wasn't uncommon for him to act recklessly. But now he was a prudent and upstanding adult.

"I couldn't abandon you."

As he sat on the ground with his hand on his injured shoulder, Kai sounded exhausted.

However, his action had been entirely natural. Saya got that from his tone.

And to Saya, that was the hardest part.

If this fight continued . . . Kai would keep putting himself in harm's way for Saya's sake. He wouldn't be stopped.

To hide her shaking, Saya held her left wrist tightly in her right hand.

"But . . . you could have been killed. Look at how hurt you are . . ."

"It's not so bad. Especially compared to you."

Saya didn't understand what he meant. She wasn't hurt at all. She could recover from injuries that would instantly kill a normal person.

Kai removed his hand from his shoulder and looked up at her.

"You have wounds that will never heal."

He tapped his thumb on his chest.

"I will be your bandage."

". . ."

Saya looked at Kai's face spotted with dirt and blood, and she couldn't say a thing.

So he knew.

He knew that up until now, the hundreds of times her soul had been hurt, he was the one who had closed the wound and healed her.

BEYOND THE FIELDS and mountain range, the night sky just began to hint at golden streaks of the coming dawn.

When they had returned to Gray's home, it was already nearly daybreak.

From the bedroom she had borrowed from Gray, Saya stepped out on the second-floor balcony and leaned her elbows on the handrail. Her body should have been tired, but for some reason she couldn't sleep.

Until just a little earlier the lights had been on in the living room, but now all the windows were dark.

David, who had called Joel in London to keep him updated, and Louis, who had put away all the small arms and equipment, were surely in their rooms sleeping.

Mao had stayed up the entire time waiting for them, and she had gotten pretty riled up when she had seen Kai come in on a stretcher, but once she had realized he wasn't seriously hurt, her attitude did a complete about-face.

"A little spit, and you'll be fine."

She had sounded a little peeved and tapped Kai's face with

her palm before quickly heading to bed. However, just before that, when they had changed the gauze on Kai's wound, Saya had noticed her hands were shaking.

They had separated from the Schiff at the harbor.

Without their help, they probably wouldn't have beaten James. Before that, without the Schiff, Kai, Hagi, and the others, she wouldn't have been able to defeat the Corpse Corps.

Kai thought of the Schiff as on the same team as him and David.

However, the Schiff had been scarred deeply by humans. It would be a long time before the Schiff would sleep under the same roof with them. Saya sensed that Kai didn't think that day was so far off.

"—You're still up?"

Kai spoke softly and she could hear the creaks in the balcony floor draw closer.

Saya nodded her head as she looked at the color of morning slowly painting the sky.

Kai came to her side and placed his arms on the railing next to her. He winced a little, probably from the pain in his shoulder.

"... I'm sorry." Saya looked down, and her apology was little more than a mumble.

At first Kai looked confused, but then seemed to recall the injury in his shoulder and gave her a weak smile.

"I told you not to think about it. Tomorrow's already going to be a big day for you."

"Tomorrow?"

"When Javia wakes up and sees you here."

Kai stifled a laugh. He was imagining the energetic Javia in the morning.

Javia and Nahabi weren't in school yet, and they had both developed a strong attachment to Kai. He felt the same way about them.

"Kai, you've really changed." The words came out of her mouth before she could think.

She had said the same thing to him in Paris when he had been protective of Aurélien. But the feeling was very different now.

"You are so strong, Kai. And I have been weak the whole time . . ."

"Nah. I'm the same."

He let out a long sigh, and his white breath faded in the last of the night air. He spoke as if he were stating an established fact.

In his attitude, Saya discovered his strength once again.

"I thought I was . . . supposed to protect everybody . . . They said I had to fight and if I didn't, people would die."

That thought still hung heavy inside her.

George and Riku, and then Clara and Elizaveta and the others—her memories of those that had died by the Chiropteran claw had kept Saya's grip on her katana. So that they wouldn't have died for nothing. Thanks to them, those still living—Kai and Mao and the others—would see tomorrow.

With that feeling in her heart, Saya had fought alongside Hagi for a full year.

"But what does it all mean? I meant to protect you, Kai, and you ended up saving me . . . and you got hurt . . ."

"Sorry."

"No. I was happy. I mean, I was happy, but . . ."

She couldn't bear the idea of Kai putting himself in danger, but knowing that she didn't have to look over her shoulder to be sure Kai had her back made her happier than words could tell. Saya couldn't reconcile these two feelings.

"How did it get to be this way?"

She was supposed to do this on her own, without anyone's help.

That was the only way to ensure no one else was hurt, and it would probably keep her alive, as well.

Both of Saya's hands were shivering, and she gripped the guardrail tight.

Kai noticed this and responded, "*Nankurunaisa.*"

She hadn't heard that word in a long time and it slipped naturally into her heart, like water on dry sand.

Saya raised her head and looked at Kai.

"Do you remember?" He asked. "As I was chasing Chiropterans, I forgot, too. Even though it is such a powerful spell."

"*. . . Nankuru . . . naisa.*" Saya said the phrase slowly, emphasizing each syllable.

The smell of the sun and salt of Okinawa filled her nose.

That scent represented the happiest time in Saya's life.

"The Saya of yesterday and the Saya of today will always be connected to the Saya of tomorrow, no matter how many tomorrows away that is. Don't forget, you are you. My family—" Kai paused a few seconds as if to collect his words before he continued, "—my precious Saya."

". . ." Saya remained silent and gazed at his face.

As night came to a close, there was no sound. Even the wind which pushed waves in the oceanlike pastures of grass quieted down.

Kai's voice hung suspended in the tranquil moment.

"After this is all over, I will go back to Okinawa. I will pick up where Dad left off." He was revealing to her that it had already been decided. "I'll sun tan until I am dark, and if it rains I'll sleep till noon, and I'll drink and dance around; but today I will do all it takes to live."

Saya listened closely, then laughed.

That was what George had been like. She stretched out her shoulders and elbows, looked up, and thought about living life not on the brink of death. She held that idea in her hands and pledged to work hard every day to raise it and let it grow freely in her heart.

Kai continued, "That's where we belong. Because Okinawa is there, I can go anywhere and still be me."

It was the same for Saya.

She could be here and live and fight because Okinawa was there.

And she had been somewhere else, too. Time with Hagi, Joel, and Diva . . . Just as Kai would say, all those pieces put together was what made Saya Otonashi.

The eastern sky sparkled the color of gold.

She looked out at the horizon and the hill in the pasture.

It was a completely different place, but it reminded Saya of the beach at home, of their last day in Okinawa, when they had watched the sunrise together.

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

From his first book, *Everyone's (a) Bounty-hunter*, and subsequent releases, such as *The Calamity of a Zombie Girl*, and *Valkyrie of the Lightning Dragon*, to this four-volume adaptation of the *Blood+* television series, RYO IKEHATA has been gaining an audience for his fiction on both sides of the Pacific. Born in Shizuoka Prefecture, he currently resides in Yokohama, Japan.

ABOUT THE ARTIST

A frequent contributor to Kadokawa's *Shonen Ace* magazine in Japan with such manga serials as *Detective Ritual*, CHIZU HASHII was the character designer for the animated *Blood+* television program, overseeing the conceptual design of all characters for the fifty-episode series. His illustrations also appear in the closing credits of many of the episodes of the television series. He lives in Tokyo.

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